

## **October 1, 2003**

No surprise, most Americans want the federal "No Call List."

The Lord knows how we feel. Jesus and the disciples had been super busy. So Jesus said, "Come with Me by yourselves to a quiet place" (Mark 6:31), but the crowds followed Him, muscled in on His quiet time. So He obliged them, fed 5,000 people, and then went by himself into the mountains. Even the Son of God needed solitude.

I once heard that a Professor Sprague of Michigan Agriculture College, now Michigan State University, had discovered a strain of rye in Russia far more productive than any rye grown in the United States. To introduce the rye to America he first had to find a place to grow the seed grain, a place where the Russian rye wouldn't cross pollinate with inferior strains. He found such a place, Manitou Island in Lake Michigan. On that isolated island he grew the seed that proved far more productive than any previously grown rye.

We all need solitude to be productive. "No Call List" or whatever it takes, the word for this Minute is "solitude."

## **October 2, 2003**

One network advertises Thursday night as "Must See TV." What is it that I must see? "Friends," a show about sex and self-obsession? "Will and Grace," same themes. "Coupling." The title itself is offensive. Other possibilities for tonight: "Temptation Island," "Queer Eye for the Straight Guy," and "Sex, Secrets and Betrayals," to name a few. Unfortunately, there's a market for that stuff. Kind of like the raccoon that comes out at night and loves to get into the garbage can.

The ultimate problem isn't the programming but the viewers who tolerate it. "Nothing that goes into a person from the outside can make him unclean. It's what comes out of a person that makes him unclean. Evil thoughts, sexual sins, stealing, murder, adultery, greed, wickedness, cheating, shameless lust, envy, cursing, arrogance, and foolishness come from within a person. All these evils come from within and make a person unclean." (Mark 7:15, 20-23)

Tonight Dale and Diane will argue about what to watch. I'll want to watch sports or the "History Channel." Diane will want to watch "HGTV." Guess who'll win? At least the lid is on our garbage can.

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## **October 3, 2003**

Although the gross national product grew a strong 3.3% last quarter, the number of people living in poverty increased 1.7 million.

In one of Jesus' parables, a rich man had a splendid house. Out on the curb was a beggar named Lazarus. When both died, the poor man went to heaven, the rich man to hell. "Son, remember that in your lifetime you received good things, while Lazarus received bad things" (Luke 16:25).

Jesus had a heart for poor people, but it's not because they're poor. It's because poverty tends to strip away all our complementary self-illusions.

A little church in Wernegerode, Germany has the carving of a naked man. Asking about it, I was told it's a reminder we brought nothing into this world and can take nothing out.

Do you see yourself naked before God? The 17th century writer Francois Fenelon: "Convicted of our helplessness, we have no confidence in ourselves, and yet we have unbounded confidence in God. These are the true foundations of the spiritual edifice." (Talking with God, p. 22)

"Blessed are the poor in spirit." (Matthew 5:3)

### **October 6, 2003**

On this date in 1890 the LDS church accepted a manifesto by presiding officer Wilford Woodruff renouncing polygamy. That followed legislative pressure from the Morrill Anti-Polygamy Act of 1862 and a decision by the Supreme Court in the 1879 case of Reynolds vs. United States. The court concluded "that obligations to one's God are automatically secondary to the citizen's duty to obey the laws of the state" (Catharine Cookson, Regulating Religion, p. 8).

Because polygamy happened in the Bible doesn't make it God's will for us. God is pictured by the Hebrew prophets as the jealous husband of His ancient people. In the New Testament Jesus Christ is presented as the bridegroom of the Church. Orthodox Christianity does not accept a third, "another testament of Jesus Christ."

Here's my main point today. History shows that the court will have the last say, our religious scruples notwithstanding. Carping about court decisions on religion is futile. Getting informed about your elected representatives in state and federal government will be far more productive. They're the ones who decide who sits on the bench. Do you know the names of your elected representatives?

### **October 7, 2003**

Today's the day after Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. Leviticus 16 says the high priest offered sacrifices to atone to God for the sins of the people. Christians see this foreshadowing Christ's sacrifice on the cross for our forgiveness.

It's in the days after talk about forgiveness that the genuineness of faith in forgiveness is proved. Believing in forgiveness can make your life harder. As you learn more about forgiveness, you learn more about sin. You and I must be worse than we like to think if someone had to die to atone for what we've done. The true believer ends up scouring heart and mind, not resting content only with outward actions.

True faith in forgiveness drives us to spend more time in Bible reading. Our post-modern culture is obsessed about feelings. "I feel guilty." You hear about forgiveness on Sunday but still feel guilty on

Monday? The way to deal with that is to get off your feelings and read the Bible's objective truths about your forgiveness. That takes time and discipline.

Forgiveness isn't easy, but do you know a better way to real peace?

## **October 8, 2003**

A multiple choice quiz:

Question One: Now that the California Recall is over, voters learned more about (a) substantive issues or (b) Arnold's personal life.

Question two: Candidates come across with (a) self-serving sound bytes or (b) as selfless leaders on substantive issues.

Question three: The media is more interested in reporting (a) personal foibles, like those of Arnold and Rush Limbaugh, or (b) objective facts, like the coming bankruptcy of Social Security and Medicare.

"Thou shalt not bear false witness," says one of the commandments. Half-truths mean half-lies, or more. More than just deceiving voters, that's an affront to God who searches every heart. To you who don't want to hear about commandments in public, isn't it common sense that self-serving spin is ultimately harmful? Will these sins of spin be visited upon our children and grandchildren?

We're all tempted to insulate parts of our lives from truth. We've all done self-serving spin. "This people honors Me with their lips but their heart is far from Me" (Isaiah 29:13). There is forgiveness for self-serving spin, but forgiveness also implies cleaning up our act.

## **October 9, 2003**

Years ago I was teaching religion class to the 8th graders at our parochial school. One day I had enough of their picking on each other, their cliquishness, their hurtful behavior. So I unloaded the standard grown-up lecture they'd probably heard many times. "Pastor, you've got it wrong," interrupted a courageous girl. "How's that?" I asked. "The reason we act that way is we're afraid that we're not going to fit in."

Why does that office worker hoard information that would help the rest of you do your job? Why does the up-and-coming professional hide the fact that he's drowning in debt? Why does the fearful woman present herself as having it all together? Is there any way that some of your behavior grows out of a fear that in some way you're not going to fit in?

Because we compartmentalize our hectic lives, security in one area of life does not afford security in another. What we need is a security that embraces every aspect of daily living, a centered sense that "It is well with my soul" whatever tries to scare us.

"Come unto Me" (Matthew 11:28).

## **October 10, 2003**

The robber slips in at night, the obvious time for his crime, most people being asleep. There are ways to get around watch dogs and many security systems. We are, after all, living in a new electronic age and there are new ways to get into the home people thought was secure when they turned out the lights. Inside he works deliberately but not in a rush. After all, he's got a job to do and he'll take the time to do it right, if

you can use the word "right" about such a terrible thing. By the time he's done, the damage is devastating. Lives ruined. Families destroyed. The community weakened.

This robber is internet porn. Today there are at least 260 million pornographic web sites. Children normally view porn for the first time at age 11. Is everyone in your family sleeping at night, or is someone on the computer? It's addictive, like booze or drugs, and leaves you with shame and emptiness.

No sin is too big for God to handle, but if the robber is in your home, first you must scream out for help.

### **October 13, 2003**

Davy Crockett served three terms in the U.S. House of Representatives. He once opposed a bill to give a pension to a navy widow. Crockett wasn't prompted by a hard heart. He argued that the constitution does not authorize benevolent expenditures by Congress. In that argument he was on solid ground. President Madison had argued the same point to Congress in 1792.

That tidbit comes from Breach of Trust, a new book by former representative Dr. Tom Coburn. Coburn's point is that the government funds many social works that should be done by individuals.

During my ministerial internship near Detroit, I invited a Bible class to talk about our individual responsibility for social ministry. As they talked, the discussion shifted to what the government does. Quiet for a while, I finally pointed out how they had unconsciously put our individual responsibility onto government.

Didn't Jesus once say something like, "Inasmuch as you shrugged it off and expected the government to do it, you didn't do it unto Me?" At least I think He said something to that effect (Matthew 25:31-46).

By the way, Davy Crockett's speech carried the day.

### **October 14, 2003**

The wife of Maryland's governor recently said, "If I had an opportunity to shoot Britney Spears, I think I would." Now Pat Robertson says, "If I could just get a nuclear device inside Foggy Bottom (that's the headquarters of the State Department), I think that's the answer...We've got to blow that thing up." (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, October 12, 2003; A4, B1). Both were exaggerating but their hyperbole still isn't consistent with the spirit of the commandment that says, "Thou shalt not kill."

The "f word" has become a popular way for people to spice up their conversations, but crude sexual language doesn't fit the spirit of the commandment that says, "Thou shalt not commit adultery."

Smarting off to parents doesn't keep "Honor thy father and thy mother."

"Oh, my God," people regularly exclaim. What does God think when we call to Him and then don't pray? "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord Thy God in vain" comes right after the commandment where God demands to be dominant in our lives. What do your speech patterns reveal about the dominance of the Holy One in your life?

### **October 15**

Another religious denomination at war! The Anglican communion is torn over gay bishops and same sex unions. Rev. John Guernsey complains about "the overturning of apostolic teaching" and leadership's

departure "from the historic faith" (AP, October 9, 2003), while bishop Frank Griswold says, "Division and splintering...are not the spirit which gives life to our church" (USA Today, October 10, 2003; 3A).

"Framework" is the word Charles Taylor uses for non-negotiable beliefs which "make sense of our lives spiritually. Not to have a framework is to fall into a life which is spiritually senseless" (Sources of the Self, pp. 16; in Cooksen, Regulating Religion, p. 101). In denominational controversies, some won't budge on inclusivity, others on Scripture and tradition. A few opinions can be swayed, but not those who feel their framework of belief is threatened. People have died for their "framework," including Jesus. His teaching literally got Him hung on a framework.

To listen to the fervor of various denominational controversies, you'd think God's future is on the line. It's not, of course, but in some measure ours is. God's looking for your framework. For what belief would you die?

## October 16, 2003

Need a miracle in your life?

These days I'm working on script for a TV show about miracles. Praise God, sometimes He touches the natural process of cause and effect and the result is miraculous. But what's God doing when your prayed-for miracle isn't granted?

Now that our children are grown and gone, Diane and I often sit together in silence. We know our love for each other, the times we've been through and the challenges still before us. While we enjoy our conversations, there's no pressure on us to prove our love by talking.

I mention that because of this from Oswald Chambers: "His silence is the sign that He is bringing you into a marvelous understanding of Himself...God has trusted you in the most intimate way possible, with an absolute silence, not of despair, but of pleasure." (October 11)

The Bible sometimes describes miracles as "signs." Miracles aren't ends in themselves but should be directions to something greater. That's God who breaks into our world, who does more for us than we know, and who sits with us...sometimes in loving silence.

## October 17, 2003

When some members of my last congregation were taking sign language lessons, they learned the sign for "boring." The next Sunday, midway through my sermon, they smiled and gave me the sign.

The opposite of boring, I think, is not entertaining but compelling. Swiss theologian Karl Barth wrote, "On Sunday morning when the bells ring to call the congregation and minister to church, there is in the air an expectancy that something great, crucial, and even momentous is to happen" (The Word of God and the Word of Man). When new church members were asked why they had joined, the two leading reasons given were the preaching and teaching (Thom S. Rainer, Surprising Insights from the Unchurched). Compelling contemporary preaching and teaching of God's eternal, revealed truth. That's why, as preacher William Willimon says, pews are bolted down. Done right, you need to hang on in worship because it changes you.

Last month the Charlotte Observer ran a photo taken by Marc Christofferson. It shows a yellow traffic sign that says, "Slow, Church Services." (September 14, 2003; p.81) Please, don't speed past church this weekend.

## October 20, 2003

My parents taught me, and Diane and I taught our children, to say bedtime prayers. I confess I don't do that too much myself. When I hit the bed, I might watch a few minutes of TV but usually fall asleep quickly.

New research shows that sleep consolidates memories, somewhat like storing data on a hard drive (AP; St. Louis Post-Dispatch, October 9; A8). I knew that. In grade school we discovered the best time to learn memory work was in the evening, shortly before going to bed. As a minister I try to memorize my sermons in the evening. Is that why I fall right to sleep??? At any rate, the best time to memorize is in the evening.

So what if I would apply that to my delinquent bedtime prayer habit? The scientific reports on memory suggest that falling asleep with my mind on some eternal truth will consolidate spiritual insights and confidence for the morning.

Now I lay me down to sleep, I pray Jay Leno my soul to keep? What good will that do tomorrow morning? I've slipped into a bad habit and need to correct it. How about you?

## October 21, 2003

Near the back of Parade magazine in many Sunday papers, you find cartoons by Bunny Hoest and John Reiner. A recent cartoon showed two men gossiping. "Steve has a big ego," one man says. "He's always 'me-deep' in conversation." (October 12; p. 18).

"You will be like God," the tempting serpent said to Eve in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:5). When you're "me-deep," everything revolves around you, including God (or so you think). The fact that He's the Creator and you and I are His creatures gets turned upside down. That's humanity's basic sin.

There's no exception to this temptation, including those who serve the church. Today the Roman Catholic Church is receiving new cardinals, including Justin Rigali, archbishop of Philadelphia. People seek out cardinals and religious celebrities, just as they seek out politicians and corporate powers. Serving in important capacities, they especially face the temptation of thinking more highly of themselves than they ought.

When the disciples argued over who was the greatest, Jesus said, "If anyone wants to be first, he must be the very last, and the servant of all" (Mark 9:35). Me-deep? Spiritual quicksand!

## October 22, 2003

Today marks the 25th anniversary of the installation of the archbishop of Krakow, Karol Wojtyla, as Pope John Paul II. In all the coverage of the anniversary, I haven't heard about one of the most important changes in this quarter century. That's the triumph of postmodern thinking in western culture. For centuries people believed there are absolute truths. Now we're told the truth is unknowable.

Demonstration: It's a fact that the papacy, not necessarily the man who occupies it, but the institution of the papacy has been divisive in the history of Christianity. But saying that rouses postmodern ire. "Who says so?" "You have your opinion; I have mine." "All roads lead to the same place."

Both the Hebrew and Christian Bible are about conflict...not this postmodern kind of our offended human opinion and pride...but about the Almighty's conflict with His wayward creatures. "God reconciled us to Himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Corinthians 5:18). How can we heal our divisions if we get huffy because our opinion has been challenged? How is truth advanced when we stop being agents of reconciliation?

## October 23, 2003

She's like a vegetable, we're told. How would you like to be compared to a tomato or a cabbage?

When the doctors ordered the feeding tubes removed from Terri Schiavo, the Florida legislature passed a law which the governor signed ordering the tubes be restored.

A vegetable? The British Medical Journal reported a study of 40 patients in a "persistent vegetative state." 43% were alert, aware, and often able to express a simple wish" ("Imposed Death, "Human Life Alliance of Minnesota Education Fund, Inc., 1998, p. 7).

But there's no quality of life, you say. Christine Busalacchi died in 1993 when her feeding tubes were removed. Yet it's reported that "she said "hi" to a doctor, made sounds to indicate which soap opera she wanted to watch, pushed buttons on a cassette recorder to play tapes and recognized her father on TV." (ibid)

Watch the clips of Mary Schiavo on TV. She's not in a coma. She wakes, she sleeps, she reacts. Should we do the same to others who don't match up to our definition of quality of life? Say, everyone who spends their days watching soap operas?

Writes Matthew Kaufman: "The goal must always be to care, never to kill" (Euthanasia and the Christian," Lutherans for Life).

## October 24, 2003

Pay attention to the words. "Persistent vegetative state," used to describe Mary Schiavo in Florida, is deceptive. Just as deceptive are descriptions of feeding through tubes. Thus it's called a "medical treatment." Do you consider your daily meals a "medical treatment?"

Ah, but the tube is different, you might say. It's artificial. Dr. Lajos Koncz worked at New England Sinai Hospital when a similar case came up in the 1980's. He said, "I don't think it (a feeding tube) is any more artificial than a fork. Will there come a day when we take away the spoons?" (American Medical News, February 14, 1986)

Jesus once talked about judgment day. Some, he said, will go to heaven, others to hell. Those condemned to hell are told, "Depart from Me, you who are cursed...For I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to eat" (Matthew 25:41-42).

Martin Luther explains the commandment, "You shall not murder," this way: "We should fear and love God so that we do not hurt or harm our neighbor in his body, but help and support him in every physical need."

## October 27, 2003

Philip Yancey wrote about two TV shows he watched. One was a 20/20 episode that showed the physician-assisted suicide of a Dutch man with ALS, Lou Gehrig's disease. That's a regular practice in the Netherlands. The second show on the Discover Channel showed Nazi films that were propaganda for killing weaker members of society. Had he seen only one show, Yancey wrote that he might well have reacted this way: "I hear these things, I shake my head, and I retreat to worry about issues closer to home" ("Christianity Today," May 15, 1995). Is that the way you and I react to the sad story of Terri Schiavo?

When Martin Niemoller was released from a Nazi prison camp, he wrote: "They came for the communists, but I wasn't a communist-so I didn't object; They came for the socialists, but I wasn't a socialist-so I didn't object; They came for the trade union leaders, but I wasn't a trade union leader-so I didn't object; They came for the Jews, but I wasn't a Jew-so I didn't object; Then they came for me-and there was no one left to object."

### October 28, 2003

Its two legs were built simultaneously, each slowly rising at a slant until finally meeting 630 feet in the air. On this date in 1965 the top section of the Gateway Arch in St. Louis was put in place. Our nation's tallest monument, the arch symbolizes the westward expansion into the Louisiana Purchase of 1803.

For me it offers an additional symbolism: faith, hope and love. You find that triad often in the Bible, most famously in 1 Corinthians 13:31. Like the legs of the arch, faith and hope are rising to something greater. Faith is the trust God works in us to hang onto His promises, sometimes in contradiction to what we see. Because God keeps His promises, we can have hope that the best is yet to come. Through faith and hope the Spirit of God lifts the soul to divine love, that is, to God Himself. That's why love is the greatest, topping out the spiritual life and lasting forever.

To me the most impressive view of the arch is standing beneath it. How about you? Do you look at the challenges of the day by letting faith and hope guide your eyes heavenward toward love?

### October 29, 2003

You can see it in your mind, the chimney of what had been a house. You see that chimney, the only thing standing after the wildfires swept through the neighborhood, destroyed homes and devastated lives. You see couples rummaging through what had been their family room, their kitchen, their life. Were they able to save at least a few family photos? Said one father, "It's going to be hard to tell them (his children) that they have no clothes or toys."

John James and Russell Friedman wrote [The Grief Recovery Handbook](#), a book to help people dealing with death, divorce, and other losses (Harper, 1998). "In our formative years an overwhelming emphasis is placed on learning how to acquire things in order to make life successful and happy." It's not just childhood. What message are all those commercials planting in you? "While we have learned much about acquiring things, we have precious little accurate information on what to do when we lose them" (p. 24).

That chimney, see it? That chimney asks, "Do you know what gives life its meaning, what it is that can never be taken from you?"

### October 30, 2003

I suspect many people in California are, or will be angry at God. Why'd He allow these fires? That's natural, and it's better to vent that anger than repress it. Stuffed anger toward God eventually hardens the heart and shuts it off from the ultimate source of hope and healing.

The challenge is to distinguish present feelings from past good. Jeremiah did that when Jerusalem was destroyed in 586 B.C.: "My soul is downcast within me. Yet this I call to mind and therefore I have hope: Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail. They are new every morning...The Lord is my portion; therefore I will wait for Him" (Lamentations 3).

Faith in God has two aspects. One is subjective, our feelings toward Him. The second is outside us, His past demonstrations of kindness and His biblical promises to us. The second has to be the basis for the

first. It it's not, you'll end up agreeing with Job's wife: "Curse God and die" (Job 2:9). That shuts you off from the source of hope and healing. Now we don't really want that, do we?

### **October 31, 2003**

Halloween. All-Hallows Eve. The day before All Saints Day. It happened to be the day back in 1517 when 33 year-old monk and professor Martin Luther made public his 95 theses. He was protesting indulgences, buying your way out of purgatory. To his surprise, his desire for an academic debate turned Europe upside down. Luther turned out to be a prolific writer, even without a word processor. Of all this Reformer wrote, I consider the following most precious...and most expressive of my own personal faith.

"I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father from eternity, and also true man, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, Who has redeemed me, a lost and condemned creature, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, but with His holy precious blood and with His innocent suffering and death, that I may be His own, and live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, even as He is risen from the dead, lives and reigns to all eternity. This is most certainly true."