

October 2006

October 2

Ver darf essen ? A rabbi translates that Yiddish question, "Who needs to eat?" Today is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement, a day kept by observant Jews by abstaining from food and drink and sexual contact. When you're close to God, many of the material things of life seem less necessary.

Too bad that Congressman Mark Foley didn't keep that in mind. The six term member of the House of Representatives resigned last week because of inappropriate e-mail conduct with a teenage boy. Foley's blatantly wrong conduct would not have happened if he had thought, Who needs this? Tempted by a married woman, Joseph got it right. "How could I do such a wicked thing and sin against God?" (Genesis 39:9).

Think of all the things in your life that are not as important as your closeness to God. Does the car have to be that new, the house added onto? Do you have to have the latest suit or dress, the clothing they're showing for the fall season? Yes, we need to eat, but do we need to eat as much as we do, as richly as we do? "Seek first the kingdom of God and its righteousness, and all these things shall be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:33). Ver darf essen ?

October 3

I had just come home from teaching a class when I heard about the fatal school shootings in Pennsylvania . In the movie "Witness" Harrison Ford plays a detective who discovered corruption in the Philadelphia police department. Ford's character (I can't remember his name) takes refuge with an Amish family. When little Samuel happens upon Ford's revolver, Grandpa Eli delivers a stern lecture about this terrible "gun of the hand." The whole movie is about the clash of cultures, modern culture colliding with closed Amish culture.

Tragically, that's what yesterday's shooting shows. There is no culture that is closed to the world around us, try as we will. The church is not a closed culture, parochial schools and home schooling can not close out modern culture, and most personally, no individual can keep out of the heart the allure, the temptations and the assaults of evil. It's that last place, in your inner being that you and I face the sin dwelling within us and sin's attacks from outside. Martin Luther wrote, "Although we are attacked by (the devil, the world, and our sinful nature), we pray that we may finally overcome them and win the victory."

My class yesterday discussed preaching on miracles. Right now the miracle we pray for is God's help to those suffering because of this terrible clash of evil with goodness.

October 4

I read that Anna Nicole Smith and her boyfriend Howard K. Stern exchanged wedding vows, sort of, on a boat in the Bahamas . If you don't know Ms. Smith's

history, blessed were you. A former Playboy playmate, she married an aged billionaire who died and she went to court over part of the old boy's estate. On September 7th she gave birth to a baby girl fathered by Mr. Stern. Now they have been sort-of married, her attorney saying the ceremony is "not legally binding." They "exchanged vows before God" but "It was not a formal legal arrangement." (AP, September 30).

Living together without "benefit of clergy" is so common that many church people see no problem with it. But the quotations show one problem, the me-centered mindset that isn't selfless enough to make a commitment legally binding before society. "They exchanged vows before God" sounds good but it's an unverifiable evasion of real accountability to each other and to society. My Sunday School mind is amazed that people professing love won't put their money where their mouth is by buying a marriage license so all the world can know the seriousness of their commitment.

"Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and sexually immoral" (Hebrews 13:4).

October 5

In the rubble of the World Trade Center, workers saw some steelwork still standing that looked like a series of crosses. Most of that steelwork was removed but one "cross" was left, a testimony to God's presence in humanity's brokenness and hurt. "Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who 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 2:3). Today that "cross" will be moved in procession from Ground Zero to St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church. It will stay there until a new memorial at the World Trade site is ready to receive it back.

Are you in the procession of the cross today? Jesus says, "If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me" (Matthew 16:24). Taking up your cross is not bravely coping with life's problems but rather taking the hits that come from being known as a follower of Jesus Christ. "If you are insulted because of the Name of Christ, you are blessed.... If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that Name" (1 Peter 4:15-16). Are you in the procession?

October 6

I'm feeling guilty. Last week a six day trip, gone last weekend and off again tomorrow. Do you explain away the time and energy you pour into work by rationalizing, "It'll pay off for my family or for my career?" One woman did and came to regret it.

"We worked day and night at a feverish pitch," wrote Athena Dean in "Consumed by Success: Reaching the top and finding God wasn't there" (Winepress, 1995). "Ailen was involved in Little League and Roby was active in drama at school. While they searched the audiences to find our faces at games and plays, they never did spot us. We were too busy chasing the dream to make time to attend their activities. Those kids hardly ever saw us, but they saw plenty of the baby sitters. We rushed them

from school to day care to baby sitters to home, shuffling them from one person's care to the other. We held the idea close that it would eventually be worth the sacrifice. I only wish the kids felt the same way." (p. 21)

Thanks Athena for the reminder. "God sets the solitary in families" (Psalm 68:6) but obsessive "chasing the dream" undoes that blessing to us. None of the Ten Commandments are about careers but two are about family. I need to stay home more!

October 9

"You fool! You'll fall off the end of the earth!" Christopher Columbus must have heard that many times. He thought he knew where he was going, a new route to India, but he didn't have a clue.

What does the future hold for you? You know very well your clues about the future may not prove true. No wise person is cocksure about the future, and that leaves room for worry and fear. The dependable things and people of the past may be taken from you. Could Columbus fall off the earth? Have you ever had a nightmare that you were falling? What's to become of me?

Venturing into an unknown future is a recurrent theme throughout the Bible. In fact, it's God's way with us. "Follow Me," Jesus says. He's already in that future. As we grope in the dark, we pray ourselves into the future, "Do not forsake me, O God my Savior" (Psalm 27:9).

"Lord God, You have called Your servants to ventures of which we cannot see the ending, by paths as yet untrodden, through perils unknown. Give us faith to go out with good courage, not knowing where we go but only that Your hand is leading us and Your love supporting us; through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen." (Lutheran Worship, collect 176)

October 10

These are the days of Succoth for our Jewish friends, the "Feast of Booths" or the "Feast of Tabernacles." It goes back to Leviticus 23:42-43: "Live in booths for seven days...so that your descendants will know that I had the Israelites live in booths when I brought them out of Egypt."

In modern practice observant Jews build a Succah (that's the singular; Succoth is plural), from natural things, like twigs, because little is permanent in life, most things are passing. "Surely the people are grass. The grass withers and the flowers fall... but the word of our God stands forever" (Isaiah 40:7-8). The thatch roof of the Succah should be airy enough that the sky can be seen. Symbolism there too. "Lift up your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all these?" (Isaiah 40:26).

When Jesus showed His glory on the Mount of Transfiguration, Peter offered to build three Succoth but the answer was no. Glimpses of glory can't be housed in the transitory things of this life. "The word of our God stands forever." On the last day of Succoth Jesus "stood and said in a loud voice, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come

to me and drink" (John 7:37). That's not transitory; He's lasting. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8).

October 11

I'm preaching in today's chapel service at Concordia Seminary, preaching about this passage, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (Luke 14:11).

That verse touches a raw nerve with me because some years ago I was told that I was arrogant. Forgive me, humility should be a trait in every Christian life, mine included. Jesus "humbled himself and became obedient unto death—even death on a cross" (Philippians 2:8). But how do you be humble? Put your head down and say, "Aw, shucks?" Wear threadbare clothes when you could wear better? Walk around church with some pious, unworldly look? You and I could do that and more and still be full of ourselves.

"Out of men's hearts come evil thoughts, sexual immorality, theft, murder" and on and on goes the list in Mark 7:21 , and out of the heart also comes lack of humility. What if we more regularly compared our heart with God's heart, our impurity compared to His purity? What if we were honest about our sinful thoughts compared to His sinlessness? What if we always remembered we're clay and He is the potter? "I have set the Lord always before me" (Psalm 16:8). The Lord to the forefront, our egos to the side. Lord, it's hard to be humble!

October 12

Some years ago Newsweek did a story on "Teen Depression" that still sticks with me. According to the National Institute of Mental Health, 3 million adolescents—that's 2 out of every 5—have symptoms of depression. Depression can lead to academic failure, social isolation, drug abuse, and suicide. Almost 1 in every 4 high school students has thought about suicide and 2 million have actually made plans to take their lives. Most troubling: Symptoms are often waved off as adolescent moods.

Dr. Harold Koplewicz says: "Parents have to know their children. Adolescence is not a good time to introduce yourself. Money should have been put in the bank earlier. Then, during adolescence, it's a continuation of a close relationship." (p. 60)

Isn't that the way of Christian love, not only for depression but for so many other problems in life? Instead of spiritual bromides..."Have faith," "Pray," "You'll be OK; all things work together for good"...Instead of copping out with quick-fix platitudes, which don't solve the deep brokenness of our sinful world, the call is to take up the cross for the long haul. "Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never fails." (1 Corinthians 13:7-8) Spend time with your children!

October 13

Here's something that should make little intrigues around your office seem embarrassingly petty. "One Night with the King" opens today in theatres. The Persian king Xerxes marries a beautiful young woman, Esther, and makes her queen.

When Esther's cousin Mordecai learns that a palace insider, Haman, is plotting to kill all the Jews in the kingdom, he pleads with Esther to intercede for her people with the king. Mordecai says to Esther, "Who knows but that you have come to royal position for such a time as this?" the most quoted passage from the book (Esther 4:14). Esther agrees and here the drama gets intense. No one, not even a wife, could go before the king unbidden but Esther went in. The king received her and... well, watch the movie or read the little book in the Bible. It does end with the triumph of good over evil.

Esther is the only book in the Bible that does not have the word "God" in it. When you're tempted to be drawn into some office gossip or intrigue, does the seeming absence of God make it seem OK? Or could it turn out the other way, the better way, that you resist and say the right thing because you know God put you there "for such a time as this?"

October 16

A question to my Roman Catholic friends: Are you still taught to genuflect, to bend your knee before you enter your pew?

Watching football yesterday afternoon, I saw symbolism in bending the knee, more symbolism than ritual reverence. When a football player catches a kickoff in the end zone, he has to make a snap decision. If I run this out, can I make good yardage? Long ago the football gods decreed that bending the knee is the way to deal with an overwhelming defense coming at you. Isn't that what the church habit of bending the knee acknowledges, I'm surrendering to an advancing divine power coming at me who could do me in? Since we learn, should learn, from church that God has chosen to be personal, to use His might, His foresight, and His presence to help us, doesn't bending the knee finally become a sign of adoration? "If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all – how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?" (Romans 8:31-32).

Historically we Lutherans have not genuflected but were good kneelers. Is it become an archaic practice? Is the cause arthritis...or spiritual pride that has fewer of us kneeling before God?

October 17

Hi, Christian here again. I think my parents are deceiving me. I still get plopped in all the usual baby plop places but now I can sit up without falling over. So I get plopped in... Mommy and Daddy call it a "high chair." I am growing and mastering all sorts of things. In a few weeks I'll be six months old. So big! I think Daddy and Mommy call it a "high chair" because they don't want me to know the truth. It's obviously a throne! It's high. I look down on lots of things. It's the most important place at the table. Of course, because I'm in it! Mommy and Daddy, please tell me what I want to hear, "Christian, we're plopping you on this throne because you are the center of the universe."

Grandpa told me the other day that something big is happening today. Today the population of the United States reaches 300 million people. Opa, I wonder, how are the 299 million, 999 thousand, 999 other people going to learn that it's all about me?

Don't tell me that those other people think it's all about them! If they do, we're going to have a lot of fights for toys and other things. Opa only smiled at me, like he knows something I don't.

October 18

The Wall Street Journal wrote about executives who run their companies on the basis of biblical principles. Mark Dillon was troubled that Tampa Bay Steel was always late paying its bills even as it pushed its customers to pay on time. "Honest scales and balances are from the Lord" (Proverbs 16:11). So Dillon convinced executives to borrow \$500,000 to pay the overdue bills. The big bugaboo of our secular society is threaded through the Wall Street Journal article: won't this offend someone?

Here's what's more troubling, the twisting of the Bible into a how-to guide for making it in business... or in personal finances or relationships or marriage or... Well, take a look at the titles in a Christian bookstore and you get the idea. "The Holy Scriptures...are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." And yes, then come derived benefits, but for the right kind of living in the workaday world. "All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." (2 Timothy 3:15-1).

It's easy to misconstrue the Bible. "Judas went away and hanged himself" (Matthew 27:5). "Go and do likewise" (Luke 10:37). Be careful how you handle God's word!

October 19

Here's a story that reminds us of the central truth of Christianity. As you know, Ken Lay was convicted on ten counts of fraud, conspiracy and lying for his role in the collapse of the energy giant Enron. Investors lost over \$60 billion in market value, thousands of people lost their jobs and lost over \$2 billion in retirement benefits. Mr. Lay was preparing to appeal the judgment handed down against him last May 25th but he died of natural causes on July 5th. On Tuesday a federal judge followed legal precedent and erased the conviction because Mr. Lay wasn't able to fully pursue his claim of innocence.

"I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more" (Jeremiah 31:34). Earthly convictions and imprisonments will happen, but because the Son of God, Jesus Christ, took the punishment for the sins of the world, there is forgiveness and eternal life in His name. Read in the New Testament Gospels and you see forgiveness has no limit, offered to the lowest, the most hated, the most convicted. "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me."

Watch the news and you'll probably hear a sound byte from someone incensed by the court's action. Are you offended that someone you don't like can be forgiven by God?

October 20

There's a spate of books coming out that are intended to influence the November 7th election. One that stopped Diane and me in our tracks is "Tempting Faith" by David

Kuo. Mr. Kuo was Special Assistant to President Bush for faith-based initiatives. We became aware of him from our daughter Elizabeth who worked faith-based issues for the House of Representatives and got to know David. Now in these weeks of political bombshell books, the media is giving the impression that Mr. Kuo has repudiated his White House time by blasting the administration.

We bought the book, and, being curious, I jumped to the last chapter. His bottom line? Political agendas in the name of Jesus are not Jesus' agenda. For example, he lists priorities of the Family Research Council, including a marriage protection amendment, defund the ACLU, enforce broadcast decency, and the like. Not necessarily bad things but Mr. Kuo says, "If we are at the point of believing these would be Jesus' political priorities, it is pretty clear we need more time with God and less time with politicians" (p. 266).

Courtesy of daughter Elizabeth, I once had lunch with Mr. Kuo in the White House. It was a delight and so will be the complete reading of his book. It's a caution to us Christians in these feverish election days.

October 23

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.

It's a true story and when I read it, I couldn't help but think, if only I, if only we, could demonstrate that same unwavering devotion to our heavenly Master.

October 24

"Can Individual Rights Tear Families Apart?" That's the title of an old tract that I came across, a tract now out of print.

"You have a right to be happy." "Put yourself in a position of power." "Take charge of your life." "Don't get mad, get even."

Author David Ludwig wrote, "These are familiar bits of advice. However, to follow such advice is deadly for the family."

When one of our daughters was in grade school, she would occasionally challenge us. "I have my rights," she would announce defiantly. Oh yea? In family it's not about me; it's about we.

Jesus says, "Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant. It's the same way with the Son of Man. He didn't come so that others could serve Him. He came to serve and give His life as a ransom for many people." (Mark 10:43-45).

Jesus, we pray, teach me the right way to take care of myself so that I might serve others for You. That way, we'll all be better off. Amen.

October 25

Is it just me, or do you also get tired of hearing everybody spout their opinions?

My wife was an elected official in our town of Collinsville. One Monday they had an "Open Forum," a time when citizens could come and speak to the City Council about whatever's on their mind. There were some useful speeches made, of course, but other people independently got up and blabbered without thinking. As Diane was getting ready to go to that Open Forum, she smiled and said, "Everyone's entitled to my opinion."

We all know people who live by that motto, "Everyone's entitled to MY opinion." But do you, do I, sometimes operate that way, talking without thinking?

Guarding our tongues. The poet Johann Heermann put that challenge in the form of a prayer.

"Keep me from saying words that later need recalling;

Guard me, lest idle speech may from my lips be falling;

But when, within my place, I must and ought to speak,

Then to my words give grace, lest I offend the weak."

October 26

An effective speaker makes use of emotion. Cicero tells how a general was acquitted of treason because his lawyer showed the many scars the general had received from his long years of fighting for Rome. George Washington ended a rebellion of his troops by putting on his glasses, asking his soldiers' indulgence because he grown older in the service of his country. Right or wrong, emotional appeals work.

So there's nothing unusual when opposing sides in the stem cell debate put famous people, like Michael Fox, on TV. Opponents are "on the wrong side of hope," says Evan Tracey of the Campaign Media Analysis Group. "Fear mongering" is how Brian Nick of the National Republic Senatorial Committee describes ads against candidates who are for adult stem cell research but against embryonic research. Fear. Hope. Emotions that may...or may not...be founded on reality. Think about hallucinogenic drugs...wow! emotions...bad reality.

Do you accept the Bible as God's word about how you should live? That is a decisive spiritual question. Say "yes" and celebrity faces shouldn't sway you. Their words, at best, will suggest something for you to research. Say "yes" to the Bible and the

Bible will finally decide your stem cell opinion. This whole debate about embryonic, not adult, stem cell research puts it to you: How serious are you about the Bible?

October 27

This Sunday many churches will recall the Protestant Reformation. Martin Luther discovered the biblical teaching that the good things we do, and should do, aren't enough to save us. Only God's forgiveness and kindness in Jesus Christ saves us. Sounds good, but how can you appreciate the gift of grace more?

You know what a "user" is, someone who uses you to get something and then moves on. Many people have the opposite problem. We resist asking for help when we need it. Reflecting on her victory over cancer, Dee Simmons wrote, "Never try to go it alone. You need the love of others fully as much as you need the medicines your doctor prescribes, and maybe even more. Other people's love and encouragement can rebuild our inner person at times when we believe that's impossible. Reach out to that love" ("Ultimate Living," p. 171).

Asking for help is one little way to appreciate God's grace more. Salvation is grace, a gift, and not a work. Asking now and then for some needed help can be a little reminder that ultimately we are dependent upon our giving God for His help. "By grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works" (Ephesians 2:8-9).

October 30

"Do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Hebrews 13:16).

I recall a study years ago that reported adults who had a well-developed personal faith had been involved as children in projects to help others. You can imagine, therefore, my big smile when my grandson e-mailed me the following.

Opa,

I was in your office today. I understand that you are in California . I was sorry to miss you. While I was in your office I couldn't help but notice that you had piles of work that needed to be done. So I decided to take a seat in your chair and go to work.

When I left the office I was tired, but I left you with a clean desk. I was commanding significant attention--Just because I was in your office, people were very interested in everything I had to say, and boy did I give them an earful! People lined up out the door!! I did my best to answer their questions and make them happy. They all said it was refreshing to see youth in the President's office! I told them that I was just keeping your chair warm. Ask Oma when you get home, she has the pictures.

Travel safe, Love you!

Christian

October 31

Halloween... All Hallow's Eve... The day before All Saints' Day. Popular culture celebrates ghosts and goblins, tricks and treats. That's fine but none of those popular things have made much of a difference in history. What has made a difference today is something that some academics and some clergy remember: Professor Martin Luther posting 95 theses in Wittenberg , Germany , on this date in 1517. For the next 30 years Luther was a prolific writer, but of all he wrote the following is, to me at least, the dearest passage of all.

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.