

2006

April 3

Yesterday in church I bowed my head piously for prayer but inside I was thinking about my week. Does God hear such scatter-brained prayer?

Apparently He did, though He answered me in His own way. Yesterday afternoon old scatter-brained attended a concert of classical church music. In a cantata on John 3:16 Dietrich Buxtehude had the soloist dwell for many measures on the Latin word "ita," meaning "so." "Just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, SO must the Son of Man be lifted up." There were enough measures on "so" that my mind, prone to wander, slowly centered on the necessity of Jesus' death for salvation.

Another piece on the same verse, this by Heinrich Schuetz, had the chorus spend many measures on the German words, "auf dass Alle," "that WHOSOEVER believeth in Him shall not perish but have everlasting life." Again, the words were played out long enough that my divided attention focused, this divine plan benefits anyone who simply trusts it, even old scatter-brained!

Increasingly I find that the great church music of the ages helps me more than the praise music of here and now. Thanks to Dr. Robert Bergt and the American Kantorei for yesterday's personally helpful concert. My prayer goal: "Give me an undivided heart, that I may fear Your name" (Psalm 86:11).

April 4

I remember a phone call from a member of my first congregation. "Are you busy?" I answered, "I'm studying." "Good," she said, "then I can talk to you." Many Americans, practical minded people, think of teaching and learning as a leisurely pursuit, not as productive as "real work." But what does counter-cultural Jesus do on Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week? He teaches His disciples. Maybe the closer you get to important work the more you should retreat, rest and learn with Jesus.

It's in rest that the Spirit teaches us the truth. Freeing yourself for some time every day, freeing yourself from unrelenting work and for devotional rest enables you ponder the truths of your being and salvation. Rest in the Bible isn't only about us; it's about us being with God. The seventh day was to be "a Sabbath of rest to the Lord," not self-centered rest (Exodus 35:2). Augustine put it this way, "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee" (Confessions I, 1).

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April 5

I've been thinking about aging, not that I'm old, mind you. You'd probably classify me as middle-aged, although that suggests I'll live to be almost 120. At 59 I can still bound up the stairs...in the morning. In the evening I trudge up, pulling on the railing. I often can't remember familiar names or call up the word I want, and that makes me wonder what's going on in my head, or not going on. I spend a lot of time thinking about all this, not morbidly but bemused.

Yesterday afternoon, 5:05 p.m. (EDT), the middle-aged man got a big smile on his face. Daughter Elizabeth and our wonderful son-in-law Darren presented us with our first grandchild, James Christian Pittman. "James" is after Diane's Dad, called to heavenly glory last fall. "The Lord gave and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord" (Job 1:21). "Christian" because his parents will make sure that he hears the same words Jesus spoke to the first James, "Follow Me" (Matthew 4:21).

We've heard it's wonderful to be grandparents, and I'm sure we'll find that to be true. For now, this guy who's spent a life with his head in God things is having a heartfelt experience of God's love. I'm smiling big time. I'm living with a grandma!

April 6

Congresswoman Cynthia McKinney scuffled with Capitol Hill police last week. Members of Congress are permitted to bypass the security detector when they enter the House or Senate office buildings. Although Ms. McKinney wasn't wearing the lapel pin that easily identifies her as a member of the House, she still went around the metal detector. The officer didn't recognize her, asked her several times to stop, she didn't and a little scuffle followed.

I've gone into the three House office buildings hundreds of times and always found the police very polite. Common sense tells me a person who enters the same building every day, maybe several times a day, and often through the same entrance would be recognized by many officers. Wouldn't the member often greet those police? After all, Capitol Hill police provide protection to members of Congress, not to mention being fellow human beings, equal before God. But if we imagine someone is beneath our station in life, not worthy of our greeting and kindness, someone we can breeze by all the time, well, you get a Cynthia McKinney incident.

Jesus says, "Settle matters quickly with your adversary...Do it while you are still with him on the way, or he may hand you over to the judge, and the judge may hand you over to the officer, and you may be thrown into prison." (Matthew 5:25).

April 7

You may soon give some thought to your plans for the upcoming week. It'll be Holy Week. Here are some Bible passages about Jesus' attitude toward Holy Week.

"My appointed time is near" (Matthew 26:18)

"Look, the hour is near, and the Son of Man is betrayed into the hands of sinners" (Matthew 26:45).

"Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour? No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour" (John 12:27)

Will you schedule your week so that it will be holy for you, so that you will ponder the mystery of God's Son determined to die and rise for you?

"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider Him who endured such opposition from sinful men" (Hebrews 12:2-3).

"Jesus, I will ponder now on your holy Passion; with Your Spirit me endow for such meditation. Grant that I in love and faith may the image cherish of your suffering, pain, and death that I may not perish."

April 10

Holy Week is a shorter work week for many people. How's the balance of work and rest in your life?

Genesis chapter one tells that God created the heavens and the earth in six days. Then Genesis 2:2 says, "On the seventh day He rested from all His work." Why did God rest? Not because He was tired. "The Creator of the ends of the earth...will not grow tired or weary" (Isaiah 40:28). One reason God rested was to identify with us in our patterns of work and rest. By working and resting, God gives us the first hint that He is Immanuel, "God with us."

Jesus is the ultimate expression of Immanuel, "God with us" (Matthew 1:23), and shows that by balancing work and rest. On Palm Sunday "Jesus entered Jerusalem and went to the temple. He looked around at everything, but since it was already late, He went out to Bethany with the Twelve" (Mark 1:11). Knowing how to balance the times and seasons, Jesus did not forego rest to work. "Each day has enough trouble of its own" (Matthew 6:34). To face the most momentous week of all troubled times, Jesus first rested.

"There remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (Hebrews 4:9). Will this Holy Week see you practicing for your heavenly rest?

P.S. We still have several open places on our trip to Germany , July 29 until August 12. Reply for more information.

April 11

More on the balance of work and rest... When you set aside time every day to be alone, time away from family, time away from church activities, time away from everything except yourself... then you'll feel bad stuff rising in your soul. What worries you, angers you, makes you cry... that stuff will rise up in your thoughts and feelings. So much of life is "garbage in;" devotional time is "garbage out."

On the Monday of Holy Week, Jesus "entered the temple area and began driving out those who were selling" (Luke 19:45). Why? It wasn't that the church was dealing

in money. What made Jesus furious was that this business was being done in the court of the Gentiles, pushing people away from God's worship. He quoted Isaiah, "My house will be called a house of prayer for all people" (56:7).

Holy Week should be a "holying" time, a time you know, like Peter, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!" (Luke 5:8) but then from your Bible or devotional resource you hear, "Whoever comes to Me I will never drive away" (John 6:37). We all need this "holying," this cleansing. Don't let the business of life push you away from the goodness and help of God. Let Jesus come in and cleanse the temple of your heart.

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I remember a phone call from a member of my first congregation. "Are you busy?" I answered, "I'm studying." "Good," she said, "then I can talk to you." Many Americans, practical minded people, think of teaching and learning as a leisurely pursuit, not as productive as "real work." But what does counter-cultural Jesus do on Tuesday and Wednesday of Holy Week? He teaches His disciples. Maybe the closer you get to important work the more you should retreat, rest and learn with Jesus.

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April 19

Yesterday in O'Hare airport I bought both Chicago papers, the Tribune and Sun-Times, and showed the front pages to my friend. Both ran big pictures of former governor George Ryan, convicted on 12 counts of corruption. "Isn't that terrible," I said. "How politics have deteriorated!" "That's right," my friend replied. "It's terrible," I said again. "Being a lifelong Illinoisan, our crooked politicians are supposed to get off. They're not supposed to be caught and convicted. This is not politics as we know it." We both laughed.

When the sin of another comes your way, are you able to smile and not get all hot and bothered? I'm not asking here if you condone the sin. You shouldn't. I'm not suggesting we shouldn't speak to a sinning friend or family member about wrong conduct. Here's what I'm asking: Do you apply your heavenly hope to the nuisances of life? Because of Christ's death and resurrection we look forward to a heavenly future where there will be no sin. So when the sin of another comes your way, and maybe hurts you personally, can you smile knowing that this, too, shall pass? If there's hope of cleaning up Illinois politics, maybe we can bear with the sins of others on this side of eternity. "Love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

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April 25

Rick Warren's book The Purpose Driven Life has been very popular, but I think a much better book is The Call by Os Guinness. In his seventh chapter Guinness uses the battle of Thermopylae to make a point. In 480 B.C. the Persian King Xerxes led a massive invasion force against Greece. With a quarter million soldiers, the Persians came against a small, fractured coalition of Greek city states. The Greeks took their stand at the narrow pass of Thermopylae, only 20 yards wide. After holding off the Persians for two days, the Greeks were finally overcome. This was the message the Greeks sent home: "Stranger, tell the Spartans that we behaved as they would wish us to, and are buried here" (p. 56).

Os Guinness then asks this question: "Will it be said of followers of Jesus Christ across the world, 'Passerby, tell our Lord that we have behaved as He would wish us to behave, and are buried here?'"

Today is "Call Day" on the campus of Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. Almost 300 men and women will be assigned to churches to serve as pastors, deaconesses and interns. My prayer, and I hope you join me, is that they will behave "as He would us to behave." And that's not a bad prayer to pray for ourselves, either.

April 26

President Richard Brodhead of Duke University has been criticized for responding too slowly to allegations that some Duke lacrosse players raped a woman they had hired to "perform" at their party. When Dr. Brodhead did act, canceling the lacrosse season and accepting the resignation of the coach, he got criticized again. "When you do this, just remember who you're doing it to," said the angry father of one of the players. So how does the president size things up? "It's been a matter of trying to figure out the right thing to do in a situation of considerable uncertainty and changing information." Is he trying to justify himself? ("The Chronicle of Higher Education," April 21, 2006).

Do you ever get defensive when you're criticized? "You don't know the whole story!" "This? After all I'm trying to do for you?" Marriage and family, work, church... These are places that regularly get our dander up. That's quite to be expected. It's rooted in our inherent self-righteousness, that fundamental sin that makes us think we're God. If we were God, we'd do no wrong, but we're not and criticism reminds us of our limited, error prone, sinful mortal status. Could criticism be a good spiritual thing? By swallowing hard, saying, "You may be right," you've arrived at your right place in the cosmos, a creature.

April 27

"You have one new voice mail."

So I punch "P" to play the new voice mail.

"Hi, Dale, this is Fred or Sally or whoever. Sorry I didn't catch you. What I'm calling about is such and such." And Fred or Sally or whoever goes on and on, telling you about such and such. Then more often than not, it ends this way: "You can reach

me at 618-555-7145 or my cell phone, 314-555-2076 ." Huh? You said it so quickly that I only got a couple numbers.

So you go back and listen to the same message again. "Hi, Dale..." and this time you get a few more numbers, but still not enough to return the phone call.

"Hi, Dale, this is Fred or Sally or whoever..." and now you're listening for the third time. It's like the movie "Ground Hog Day," same thing over and over and over again. Maddening!

Just because you've said it, doesn't mean I've understood it. Oral communication is more than just making your point. That works in print where a reader can pause but successful oral communication needs slowness and repetition. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" (Matthew 7:12). That might help communication in many areas of your life, not just these confounded voice mails!

April 28

Some things are profoundly sad and inexplicable. According to a news report from WANE-TV, "a Taylor University van, filled with nine people, collided with a semi Wednesday night. It happened around 8:00 at the 66 mile marker just north of Marion (Indiana)." Four students and one Taylor employee were killed. With almost 2000 students, Taylor University describes itself as "an evangelical, independent, interdenominational Christian liberal arts college where faith, living, and learning are integrated."

These were to be days of joy on the Taylor campuses. Taylor 's new president Dr. Eugene Habecker is to be inaugurated today. This tragic accident brings a profound hurt that cannot be removed by some glib references to heaven. The grief to family and friends will never go away on this side of eternity. The message of Christ for us is about things like this, about the cross, about suffering in and for a sinful world, much more than about glitz and success here and now because you believe in Jesus. A tragic accident like this shows up the shallowness of so much popular religion in America today.

We extend our sympathies to President Habecker and the entire Taylor University community. And if I may, next time you like a sermon, please don't say, "I enjoyed that sermon." That's just not what it's about on this side of eternity.