

August 2007

August 1-3 and 6-10 no minutes-vacation

August 13

In church while we were on vacation, I held grandson Christian through the sermon and prayers. The little guy was sound asleep. It wasn't the sermon, which was an excellent sermon about prayer and included a list of the selfish ways we misuse the privilege of talking to our heavenly Father. As I said, the sermon was excellent and it made us pay more attention when the prayers of the congregation were spoken. With Christian asleep, I stayed seated during the prayers and did something new for me, I kept my eyes open and looked at him.

I don't know where the practice of closing the eyes for prayer came from. An acquaintance of mine, Metropolitan Nicolas of Detroit, tells me that the Greek Orthodox tradition is to pray with eyes open. That way you really see what you're praying for and you're more fully aware of God's presence when His people gather.

Maybe you're like me. Coming back from a great vacation and getting back to work can be a difficult readjustment. "Difficult" may be too positive a word. I'm finding it helpful to look at the work on the desk, the stresses reviving in my heart and difficult people by praying with my with eyes wide open. Not a bad practice, after vacation or any day.

August 14

We spent our vacation at a camp in Arcadia , Michigan . It's a dream location, right on Lake Michigan , surrounded by sand dunes, but... Lousy cell phone service, no internet for guests, and only one TV. The buzz all week? Campers shared with one another the places where they discovered e-connectability.

Walter Kirn wrote in "The New York Times Magazine" about Americans not taking vacations. Some countries legally mandate paid leave, like France requiring 30 days, Sweden 25 days, and Canada 10. The U.S. requires no paid vacation. If we do go someplace, we have our laptops and Blackberries handy so we can remain in touch with work. That's a vacation???

Kirn says the conventional wisdom is that we are "increasingly reluctant to pause from (our) labors and refresh our souls." (August 5; pp. 11-12)

That precisely why we do need vacations...and we need time off every week and hours free for ourselves every day. Being conscious of work 24/7 crowds grace out of your heart. You become addicted to working and become undisciplined to the spiritual practice of consciously receiving the gifts God gives. Do you imagine that shutting out grace for the sake of work now will save you at the end of life?

"Our heart is restless until it rests in Thee" (Augustine, "Confessions," 1.1)

August 15

Hi, Christian here! I am back from vacation. I was surrounded by people. Everyone wanted to pick me up. What am I, the Pillsbury Dough Boy? Especially my relatives. No peace with relatives. I showed them. When I didn't want to be scooped up, I cried. After a week with your relatives, you know who you like and who you don't like.

Opa is big and has a booming voice. Sometimes he scares me. Oma is different. Oma scoops me up. I cry but she settles me down. Oma is OK. I love my Daddy. I have a shirt that says, "Daddy Rocks." But my Mommy is best. When Mommy leaves me with another relative, Dough Boy turns into the Incredible Hulk. Do all babies feel like that about their mommies?

Last week Opa and I worked on our Minutes. I am the creative partner. Opa just slugs away. Sometimes even slugs know something. Opa said, "Christian, Wednesday the 15th is the day of "St. Mary, Mother of Our Lord." We remember that God sent His Son to be born of Mary. I'm glad Opa told me that. Starting the Savior of the world off with a mommy? Makes sense to me.

August 16

Credit has become a huge problem for American markets. American Home Mortgage, one of the nation's top housing lenders, filed for bankruptcy last week. It's not the first; over 50 other lenders filed last year. One reason has been subprime loans to risky borrowers. American Home Mortgage didn't make subprime loans but still got caught up in the web of the credit industry's problems.

Deuteronomy prescribed an interesting approach toward credit debt. "At the end of every seven years you must cancel debts" (Deuteronomy 15:1). Just as every seventh day was to be a day of rest from labor, so every seventh year was to be a rest from burdens, including debt. It was intended to get people out of debt. "There need be no poor people among you" (Deuteronomy 15:4). Perhaps most important, it was to be a strong reminder that financial resources were ultimately a gift of God. "Remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you the ability to produce wealth" (Deuteronomy 8:18).

America won't institute such a system, of course, and there is no evidence that Israel actually did. But if you realize that your balances depend upon more than hard work and financial savvy, that they're ultimately gifts given by God, the web of credit will be less likely to catch you.

August 17

Some parts of the country have suffered with extreme heat and little or no rain. That's tough on our yards and gardens, unless you like weeds. They can thrive in the brutal weather of August. Coming back from vacation, Diane and I furiously went after the flourishing weeds.

I recalled a Q&A from the Chicago Tribune last spring. Question: "What is the most effective way to remove weeds growing in my vegetable beds? I don't want to use a lot of chemicals." Answer: "The least toxic method of dealing with weeds is always the best method to try first...hand removal." (May 27, 2007 ; Section 4, page 5).

Work! Pull 'em out! Get your hands dirty! People who know a dangerous little about the Bible like to spout that work is a result of our fall into sin. Yes, God told Adam, the ground "will produce thorns and thistles for you," but there was work, delightful work, in pre-sin paradise. "The Lord God had planted a garden...in Eden . The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it." (Genesis 2:8, 15; 3:18). It's sin that has made work challenging, and has made gardening less than easy in August. Diane and I are thinking about buying a condo for retirement.

August 20

Although the First Amendment was originally aimed only at the federal government, the Supreme Court since the 1940s has applied it to the state and local level. The result has been a flood of controversial church-state cases.

Should public universities install footbaths for Muslim students? Muslims are required to pray five times a day and ritual preparation for those prayers includes foot washing. When some universities discovered sinks coming loose from the walls, the answer was ritual foot washings. 12 universities installed special foot washing areas in rest rooms. The constitutional church-state questions are obvious.

If you form an opinion, consider this. In the history of the Supreme Court, rulings for religious minorities have also benefited the Christian majority. For example, in 1981 the "International Society for Krishna Consciousness" won the right to distribute religious literature. In 1993 the "Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye" won the right for the ritual sacrifice of animals. The thought repels me, but it did assert free exercise of religion. My favorite: In a case growing out of World War I, the Court ruled that a teacher named Meyer, no relative, could use the German language in a Nebraska religious school.

I don't know what to think about foot washing but we should be cautious. Immediate condemnation might be called foot reflexology.

August 21

You hear some Christians talk about the "sovereignty of God," that God is supreme, that He is over all things, and rules with power. No question that the Bible often presents God that way. "Where were you when I laid the earth's foundation?" (Job 38:1) It's a good theme to keep in mind when you're talking with someone who makes God out to be a lackey, who imagines God will role over and accept anyone who does or believes almost anything.

True as that is, the sovereignty of God often is not comforting. The people devastated by the earthquake in Peru , by Hurricane Dean in the Caribbean , by flooding in Texas , Oklahoma , Wisconsin and Minnesota , and by shifting ground that killed miners in Utah ... These victims of natural catastrophes can easily draw the conclusion that the Sovereign God is capricious. That's the real test. It's when the Creator seems to be against you that you need trust in His goodness, a faith that goes against all visible evidence.

"How long, O Lord? Will You forget me forever? How long will You hide Your face from me? I trust in Your unfailing love." (Psalm 13:1, 5) So be prepared, Bible prepared, to trust Him as Savior...because the time will come when the Sovereign will seem to be against you.

August 22

The other week I was in eastern Germany in an area called the "Spreewald." "Wald" is the German word for "forest" and "Spree" is the name of a river. Best known as the river that runs through Berlin, the Spree is most enchanting away from Berlin in this area called the "Spreewald." Here it splits into countless canals, each canal some twenty or thirty feet wide. The result is a labyrinth of water and wooded islands that puts the visitor in romantic scenes from a time we thought was long gone, old houses, beautiful flowers in their window boxes and yards, and haystacks in the small open fields.

You can rent boats and paddle your way through the canals. Some of the boats are two-seaters, similar to kayaks. The locals have observed that when a man and a woman are paddling strenuously and in harmony they are often a couple that is engaged. The couple that paddles together but paddles more slowly has been married for some time. The locals, who observe these visitors every day, say that when one partner paddles while the other coasts, that couple has been married a long time. And when they're barely paddling, they're about to divorce.

"Love always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails."
(1 Corinthians 13:7-8)

August 23

Poor George Tenet. A report was released Tuesday about the C.I.A.'s failure to prevent the 9-11 attacks. While no laws were broken and no employee was guilty of misconduct, mismanagement is alleged. The director of the C.I.A. when 9-11 happened, poor Mr. Tenet, is in the bulls-eye.

Joseph was accused of attempted rape, a totally false charge, but still wound up in prison. How do you deal with criticism? "While Joseph was there in the prison, the Lord was with him" (Genesis 39:20-21). When the bullets of criticism come at you horizontally, you do best to go vertical, to God.

"My critics are wrong," you say...but deep down you're troubled. Perhaps they're right? I presume that Mr. Tenet knows that feeling. Defend yourself as you will, now you're dealing with guilt. Real or imagined, criticism has aroused guilt in your heart.

"The Lord has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners." Jesus quoted that passage from Isaiah 61 and then says: "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:18-19, 21). His words come down to tend you when you're criticized and forgive you when you're guilty. Go vertical to deal with the horizontal.

August 24

Hi, Christian here! You big people say, "Children learn what they live." No! I want more.

Mommy and Daddy have this little thing they hold. They hold it by their ear. They hold it and talk. Sometimes I pick up their little thing. If I hold it right, someone talks to me out of the little thing. Once I got Oma. I hold it by my ear and babble. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. We children learn what we live.

There is a can in the kitchen. It is about my size. I see Mommy and Daddy throw things into this can. So I throw things in the can too. Sometimes, when I am done blah, blah, blahing on the little thing, I throw it in the can. Mommy and Daddy do not smile then. Something about having to go through the garbage before they take it out.

"Children learn what they live" is not enough. If big people talk in the little thing and if big people throw things in the can, why can't I? I hope Mommy and Daddy will explain it to me. Do you old people explain to young people? Or do you just grumble about the garbage.

August 27

John Ringle has a challenge. The director of housing for the University of Illinois at Springfield, Ringle has to convince dormitory students that they can't turn the thermostat up to 80 degrees when it's freezing. The opposite is probably true when it's sizzling outside. Ringle gets some student utility bills of \$400 for 1,200 square feet. (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, May 23, 2007 ; D2)

There may have been a time when you could lecture young people but not today. Today the lessons of life have to be taught by more persuasion and less pontification. More and more I teach my classes by pulling up a chair and teaching the day's lesson by telling how I've experienced things in my life. That includes sharing the practical things, the parish ministry things, and especially the goodness of God as I look back.

God has not promised each generation stupendous miracles, like crossing the Red Sea or seeing the resurrected Christ here and now. What the Bible does promise the younger generation is that the older generation will sit down and tell how it was...and how good and saving God was "back in the day." "One generation will commend your works to another" (Psalm 145:4). They might be so dumbfounded that you didn't have air conditioning that they'll listen to your eternal lessons!

August 28

Last week I attended a men's prayer breakfast. The speaker was Mr. Larry Carlson of Youth Haven, a Christian non-profit that operates in Michigan and Arizona for children 7-12. Special children, that is. From Youth Haven's website: "The children who come to Youth Haven face various negative influences and circumstances such as abuse, neglect, broken homes or poverty. Some have experienced tragic losses or suffer from the devastating effects of drug and alcohol abuse. The boys and girls are referred to the Ranch by welfare agencies, school counselors, social service agencies, churches, family members, and parents. Sadly, many of the children who attend Youth Haven's programs believe they have no real hope for the future."

One such child came up and asked Larry Carlson about Jesus Christ. "Why did his parents give him a swear word for a name?"

Mr. Carlson told us that many of these children grow up in homes where everything has been damned. Jesus Christ was invoked to cuss out the mom or dad, to cuss out the neighbor, the boss, the teacher, to cuss out the young, impressionable child. Children learn what they live, and they learn only a Jesus who has damned everything in their young, fragile lives.

Think about it.

August 29

There's some good news in today's paper. Senator Tim Johnson of South Dakota is returning to work and public life after eight months of therapy for a brain hemorrhage. Although his speech is slow and sometimes slurred, Mr. Johnson spoke ably yesterday for 15 minutes. He made a quip worth taking with us today.

"Hard work is something in which I take great pride, so let me say this tonight going forward: I am back. Of course, I believe I have an unfair edge over most of my colleagues right now. My mind works faster than my mouth does. Washington would probably be a better place if more people took a moment to think before they spoke." (New York Times, August 29; A15)

"When we put bits into the mouths of horses to make them obey us we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. It is a restless evil." (James 3:3-5, 8)

Here's a word for today: "Logorrhea," diarrhea of the mouth. Repentance is our life-long therapy and that'll be good news too.

August 30

Perhaps the most memorable sermon I've heard was preached by Professor Waldemar Degner. That was back in the mid-sixties when I was a student at Concordia College in Milwaukee. Forty years ago, memorable indeed! Dr. Degner preached into my heart the word "nevertheless."

He spoke on Luke chapter five. Fisherman Peter had spent the night on the Sea of Galilee but caught nothing. Jesus told him to go out and try once more. Peter must have thought it would be a useless effort (he did do this for a living), but because he had heard people talking about Jesus and His miracles, he agreed. Despite the apparent futility of it all, Peter said, "Nevertheless, at Thy word I will let down the net." (Luke 5:5)

Sometimes the evidence goes against all the promises that God is good. Nevertheless, hang onto the promises. "For the good we all inherit, Thanks be to God. For the wonders that astound us, For the truths that still confound us, Most of all, that love has found us, Thanks be to God." (Fred Pratt Green)

So use the next days to be astounded by the wonders of God and be confounded by the biblical truths that seem to go against the evidence. All your doubts about God admitted, nevertheless He loves you.

August 31

Some biblical teachings about labor:

It's what God wants us to be about: "Go to the ant, you sluggard!" (Proverbs 6:9) Jesus saw His life as work. "As long as it is day, we must do the work of Him who sent Me. Night is coming, when no one can work." (John 9:4). Therefore the people of Christ do good works. "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do." (Ephesians 2:10)

Works show who really lives in your heart. "It is God who works in you to will and to act according to His good purpose." (Philippians 2:13) On the other hand, some people "claim to know God, but by their works they deny Him." (Titus 1:16)

The time will come when Christ's people rest from their labor, not just for a weekend but rest for eternity. "Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord.... They will rest from their labor, for their deeds will follow them." (Revelation 14:13)

Until that day, enjoy the weekend's rest and may your labors be blessed. "May the favor of the Lord our God rest upon us; establish the work of our hands for us – yes, establish the work of our hands." (Psalm 90:17)