

## **August 2008**

### **August 1**

Some people take their children to church to learn some moral lessons in their formative years. An obituary reminds me there's more for children in church than only basic lessons in right and wrong.

Otto Fuerbringer died Monday. His strange last name isn't strange to me. In the 1970's I served a rural church in Venedy, Illinois. The first pastor of that congregation back in the 1840's was Rev. Ottomar Fuerbringer. He had a son named Ludwig, who also entered the ministry and became president of Concordia Seminary from 1931 to 1943. One of Ludwig's children was this Otto, born in 1910. Otto chose not to enter the ministry but pursued a career in journalism, finally becoming the managing editor of "Time" magazine.

I never met Mr. Fuerbringer but I have a very good idea where his occupation with writing and words originated. The Lutheran church puts a high premium on language studies because we believe God's will and salvation come to us through the words of the Bible. Mr. Fuerbringer was reared in a Word-centered family and so he made words his career.

The regular experience of church instills more than morality. And when we ponder the obituary page, we consider another dimension to church-going. "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life." (John 6:68)

### **August 4**

If you're looking for something to read, check out "Caught in the Middle" by Richard Longworth. It's about globalization, "a revolution in communications" which has created global corporations and global product and money markets. Debates about NAFTA and immigration and foreign companies buying American companies are symptoms of globalization.

Longworth says the Midwest is in a state of denial. For decades the Midwest was a powerhouse of agriculture and heavy industry but the small farmer has been squeezed out and heavy industry has left for cheaper locations. The author's prognosis is that rural towns will continue to decline. Except for Chicago, which has adjusted to globalization, cities like Detroit and Cleveland are dead and may be beyond revitalization. The losers in globalization are the unskilled and uneducated, who, unlike earlier generations, aren't getting much concern from big corporations and prospering people.

And that makes this a book to trouble the religiously complacent. If you don't read "Caught in the Middle," may I suggest the prophets in the Bible? They didn't write about globalization but they did complain that the "haves" in ancient Israel were not taking care of the "have nots." I wouldn't call Longworth or the prophets a "good read." Don't bother with them if you're not serious about the social dimension of your faith.

### **August 5**

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn died Sunday in Moscow. In his most famous work, "The Gulag Archipelago," Solzhenitsyn described Soviet prison camps at length, 300,000 words of length. American diplomat George Kennan said "Gulag" was "the greatest and most powerful single indictment of a political regime ever to be leveled in modern times."

Solzhenitsyn was awarded the Nobel Prize in 1970. In his acceptance speech he wrote about a time when "in the midst of exhausting prison camp relocations, marching in a column of prisoners in the gloom of bitterly cold evenings, with strings of camp lights glimmering through the darkness, we would often feel rising in our breast what we would have wanted to shout out to the whole world – if only the whole world could have heard us." (New York Times, August 4; A15, 16)

How many American politicians running for office give evidence of that kind of passion for our country? And if they are showing that passion, aren't the self-serving media filtering the information you and I receive? It makes me angry. But anyone can throw the stones I just threw. Cheap shots. Are you and I knowledgeable about issues in the campaign? Anyone can answer, "Yes." Do you and I know enough, are we passionate enough for our country, to be able to write 300,000 words? Maybe just 3,000?

## August 6

I'm taking time this August to rebuild the deck on our house. It's 25 years old, looks bad and is full of splinters. When I started the demo, the blessed woman despaired. "Oh, no! Will you finish this project?" Diane is right. Not finishing projects is one of my faults. Oh, she has a long list against me!

Which leads me to this: Carlin Romano, professor at the University of Pennsylvania, reviewed a new book by Frances Dolan, "Marriage and Violence: The Early Modern Legacy." Here are some snippets from the review. "'Marriage may be historic,' Dolan concedes, 'but its history is one of constant, constitutive crisis and conflict.'" Again, "marriage amounts to a form of 'violence' against individuality." ("The Chronicle Review," p. B5)

Come, dear professor, to where most of us actually live. Diane has a list of my faults and I have a list, a short list, of hers. What works – and I think we can say this after 35 years of marriage – is mutual admission of faults and sins in a greater context of forgiveness. Marriage, like everything else on this side of eternity, is riddled with sin and our need for forgiveness. Why don't we just admit our imperfection and enjoy life? "Love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8). And, Diane, I am going to finish that deck!

## August 7

You've done this, haven't you? Looked up at the clouds and imagined seeing animals or or whatever? Get your imagination into this.

Nebraska State Senator Ernie Chambers has sued God. Yup, he's suing God. Chambers is seeking a court injunction to stop God from making terrorist threats against him and against the people of Omaha. I got this story from the Associated Press but I'm not sure what to make of it. Perhaps the senator is trying to make a point about frivolous law suits. But now that we're talking about going into court against God...

The Hebrew prophets sometimes picture God taking His people to court. Hosea 4:1ff. is an example. "The Lord has a controversy with the inhabitants of the land. There is no faithfulness or steadfast love, and no knowledge of God in the land; there is swearing, lying, murder, stealing, and committing adultery; they break all bounds." It's not us hauling God into court. It's God suing us for our sins.

So look to the clouds and kick in your imagination. "Behold, He is coming with the clouds and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him, and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of Him." (Revelation 1:7) Repentance is about settling with God before He comes to call us to account.

## **August 8**

I don't know that I'll watch the Olympic opening ceremony. The Olympic committee offended me. I offered to compete but they wouldn't have me. I told them I couldn't run a mile but could jog a lap around the track. Doesn't God take us just as we are? But they'd have none of it.

What I said in jest many people say in earnest. They imagine God's unconditional acceptance in Christ frees them from the duty to meet standards. I've had people full of Jesus tell me they want to become ministers but they're shocked if they're told they don't meet the requirements. Yes, God forgives us when we're sorry for our sins... "Just as I am with one plea... and that's the best thing we've all got going for us, but most of daily life is duty doing. That's why we admire Olympic athletes. They've done their duty and met the highest standards.

William Wordsworth wrote an "Ode to Duty." "Stern Lawgiver! Yet thou dost wear the godhead's most benign grace; Nor know we anything as fair as the smile upon thy face. Flowers laugh before thee on their beds; and fragrance in thy footing treads; thou dost preserve the stars from wrong; and the most ancient heavens through thee are fresh and strong." True faith leads to duty doing.

## **August 11**

Ever feel that God's goodness is a little David compared to the big Goliaths of bad news coming your way? I do. God's good things to us are many, we admit that, but in the push and shove of daily life our problems are as big as Goliath... and God's presence? The weakling David.

War between Russian and Georgia was the biggest news this weekend. We are weary of Iraq, wary of Iran, and now Russia bullies a little country. High stakes, and little people are victims, the 30,000 innocent Georgians fleeing for their lives. We identify with them.

Against so much evidence of life, you and I have bet our lives on a little David, on the ultimate victory of God's goodness over the evils of this world. Here's our hope, little David's descendant, Jesus. "A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out. In faithfulness He will bring forth justice; He will not falter or be discouraged till He establishes justice on earth." (Isaiah 42:2-4)

We weren't there when David beat Goliath but we trust that the story told is true. Spirit, help us trust that the David of God's goodness will one day defeat the Goliaths of bad news threatening us.

## **August 12**

The Lord hates "a heart that devises wicked schemes (and) feet that are quick to rush into evil." (Proverbs 6:18-19)

There were some quick, rushing feet in Chicago last Saturday. The 79<sup>th</sup> annual "Bud Billiken Parade" stepped off at 10:00 with 400,000 in attendance. Those who came by car had to find places to park, obviously, and most of them parked wherever they could legally park.

Duh! Who's going to park illegally knowing that their car might be towed during the parade? When the parade goers had parked their cars, workers for "Rendered Services, Inc.," a towing company, rushed into lots and posted no parking signs. Of course, they were seen, by residents, store owners and motorists. With the new signs planted, Rendered Services started towing. From the lot at 51<sup>st</sup> and Indiana they towed 50 cars. At other lots busy feet were also jumping in and out of tow trucks. The cost to retrieve your car? \$170.

The scam was so obvious that you conclude the busy feet were commanded by stupid minds.

It's refreshing to come across a story that reinforces our sense of basic morality. "Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil. The Lord will be at your side and will keep your foot from being snared." (Proverbs 3:7, 26)

## **August 13**

People often make me smile...and sometimes wonder. Here's an example. My job is president of Concordia Seminary. As seminaries go, it's a big school. Obviously the job involves leadership, although I haven't really figured leadership out. So it makes me smile when people give me a book about leadership. "Here, you might find this helpful." Hmm... What are you saying? I have a whole shelf of leadership books that people have given me.

There is one leadership book I do read. It's Proverbs, the wisdom of Solomon. While it doesn't give direct advice about things like budgets and strategic planning, Proverbs teaches the godly integrity we all must have, for the truth is we are all leaders in one way or another. "My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you peace and prosperity. Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to Him and He will make your paths straight." (3:1-2, 5-6)

Senator John Edwards wanted to be leader in chief. I should have given him my favorite leadership book...and he should have obeyed it. "Wisdom will save you also from the adulterous woman, from the wayward woman with her seductive words" (2:16)

## **August 14**

The best known meaning of "scandal" is public disgrace because people's sensitivities have been offended. Mrs. Victoria Osteen is co-pastor with husband Joel of the Lakewood Church in Houston, a church that draws 40,000 each weekend and millions on TV. Mrs. Osteen is

being sued by flight attendant Sharon Brown for verbal and physical abuse but the Osteen's say no such thing happened. Ms. Brown says that the incident **affected her faith**, calling Joel Osteen the Devil and the Lakewood Church a cult.

That's a meaning of "scandal" that many people don't know. When you do something that leads another person into sin and away from true faith, the Bible calls it "scandal." Jesus says, "Woe to the world because of the things that cause people to sin! Such things must come, but woe to the man through whom they come!" (Matthew 18:7) The original Greek text uses the word "scandal" three times in that verse.

Whether or not the Osteen's preach true biblical Christianity isn't my point here. This is: we should be careful lest our words and actions push another person into sin or wrong belief. "Watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles ("scandals" in Greek) in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned." (Romans 16:17)

## August 15

Dathan Gazelka came back from Iraq and went to work for his wife in real estate. The transition wasn't easy. He was used to clear cut, black and white, "Yes, sir," "No, ma'am," and not much gray. So when Dathan took potential home buyers out, he told them, "Listen, we're going to look at three houses today and you're going to buy one of them." His wife Mandy had to smooth over the ruffled feelings of customers. Fortunately, Dathan was offered a job as a National Guard recruiter, something much more to his liking. (The Paris Beacon News, August 13; page 6)

J. R. Salzman lost his right arm in Iraq. Brushing his teeth, zipping up a jacket, writing... all became monumental efforts. And most of us can't begin to imagine the nightmares he had. His wife Josie felt the strain; they both felt it, the trauma was ruining their life. J. R. wrote in his blog, "Having given two years of my life and my right arm is more than enough for my country. Now I want to get back to my private life, and learn how to live again all over." (The Paris Beacon News, August 12, page 6)

While many of us are enjoying the last days of summer, our veterans are coping with reentry. Let us remember.

## August 18

The Census Bureau reported last week that the total number of ethnics will outnumber non-Hispanic whites by 2042. Immigration is one reason. Today's number of 1.3 million per year is expected to reach 2 million by about 2050. All those immigrants have a higher birth rate. Mark Mather of the Population Reference Bureau said, "No other country has experienced such rapid racial and ethnic change." (New York Times, August 14; A1)

Not in my backyard! Some people say that now, but remember, they said it when the Irish, Italians, Germans, Poles and others came. And they said it back in Bible times. The people of ancient Israel had no use for the Samaritans, and many Jews and Greeks wanted nothing to do with each other. But what did Jesus do? He broke social custom and talked with a Samaritan woman (John 4). What does Paul say about the power of Christ's love? "You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus... There is neither Jew nor Greek" (Galatians 3:26, 28)

I wonder how many people who sat in church yesterday can set aside the Christian message and dwell on reasons to hate people who are different? I'm not talking here about immigration policies; I'm just thinking ahead to the day when the melting pot won't be America but heaven.

## **August 19**

Here's hoping that you'll suit up and participate in the Olympic spirit!

We're watching amazing athletes. Not a one got to the Olympics by being unfocused and undisciplined. Dreams of gold can't be realized without incredibly long hard days and years of focused training.

David Francis had that kind of spirit. He wasn't a world class athlete, just a college basketball player in the late 1860's. But when David Francis put on his business suit, his focus and discipline rivaled any Olympian. Senator Harry Hawes said, Francis "was a big man who had big conceptions...and did big things."

More than anyone else, David Francis was responsible for the first Olympics held in the western hemisphere. They were held in St. Louis in 1904 on the new campus of Washington University. The stadium and gymnasium for those games are still in use, name after David Francis. Said Senator Hawes, "He invited the nation and the nation came; he invited the world and the world came."

I'm weary of people who only talk about their vision. I'm indebted...and so are you...to people who work long and hard to realize their vision for the good of us all. That's an Olympic spirit we can all put on. "Faith apart from works is dead." (James 2:26)

## **August 20**

Young people have a way of rolling their eyes when older people say something old foggy. Older people aren't that agile, so they just stare when they can't understand youth.

Each year Beloit College releases its Mindset List, which, says the college website, "provides a snapshot of the world view of the school's incoming freshmen." Here's a sampling. Harry Potter could be their classmate. GPS systems have always been available. They've never heard a gas station attendant ask, "Want me to check under the hood?" The "Tonight" show was always hosted by Jay Leno.

Granted, they're not little children any more but the way Jesus treated the littlest children should shape our attitude toward young adults. "Little children were brought to Jesus...but the disciples rebuked those who brought them. Jesus said, 'Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.'" (Matthew 19:13) "Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 18:3)

If older people show sincere openness to young people...and that's a big "if"... we can share what it was like for us back in B.C. times, "before computers." And they might hear too about the hope that fills us, and hear without rolling their eyes.

## August 21

How 'bout some help here!

When that's my plea, as it often is, nothing helps as much as some quiet thinking on a few Bible passages. But where do you find helpful passages? Such a big, forbidding book, the Bible!

I don't know if "Precious Bible Promises" by Thomas Nelson Publishers is still in print, but Christian book stores will have something comparable. This is a listing of Bible passages for almost every spiritual need in life. Here are some that helped me yesterday.

"Eye has not seen, nor ear heard, nor have entered into the heart of man the things which God has prepared for those who love Him." (1 Corinthians 2:9)

"We know that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose." (Romans 8:28)

"Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2)

There are hundreds more promises pulled out of that mysterious book the Bible, but just a few usually do the job. Do you have a book to go to when you're feeling, "How 'bout some help here?"

## August 22

A friend sent me a story about a professor traveling with his wife in the South, in Tennessee to be exact. They stopped at a diner, and noticed a distinguished white-haired gentleman going from table to table talking to people. He came to the professor's table, pulled up a chair and started to tell a story.

He said there once was a little boy in that neighborhood who'd been born to an unwed mother. Everywhere the boy was taunted, "Hey, boy, who's your daddy?" He was so shamed that he slipped in and out of every place he had to go. Church too. But one day the new preacher caught him at the door. Not knowing the child, the preacher innocently asked, "Who's your daddy?" No answer. The preacher put it together. "Wait a minute!" he said. "I know who you are! I see the family resemblance now. You are a child of God." The story told, the white-haired man wished the professor and his wife a good visit and then added that he was that boy. After he left, the professor asked the waitress, "Who was that?" She said, "That's Ben Hooper. He's governor of Tennessee!"

Although the story may have been embellished over the years, it's essentially true and so is the moral. You are a child of God. You are loved and you have eternal value.

**P.S. I'm going to savor the last days of summer. No "Minute" until September 3<sup>rd</sup>.**

