

## June 1

To me, church attendance numbers provide a good indicator of congregational health. So I feel sorry for Rev. Stephen Josoma in Dedham, Massachusetts. Despite his parish growing 20% last year and having a budget surplus, the Boston archdiocese decreed that St. Susanna's is one of 65 churches to be closed.

Like many priests, parishioners are also disappointed by the closings. "I made all my sacraments here," said 77-year-old Mary Walsh of St. Catherine of Siena church. "I went to school here, and I come here every morning. It was just my understanding that I was going to be buried from this parish, and now I don't know where I am going to go." (New York Times News Service in Chicago Tribune; May 26; pp. 1, 12)

It's one thing to be disappointed by a big, impersonal corporation but when the church disappoints you, it can really cut deep. I don't know enough to affirm or criticize the archdiocesan decision, but I do draw this conclusion. Sinners, even churchly ones, will by definition sooner or later disappoint one another. Only a perfect human is capable of never disappointing us. "He committed no sin" (1 Peter 2:22). That's the One in whom we best place our hopes.

## June 2

If you've ever suspected some people who counsel others about marriage problems don't know how to manage their own lives, consider Becky Whetstone.

Ms. Whetstone claims that her ex was guilty of "verbal, emotional, physical and financial abuse." That's not unusual in testy divorces and neither is resentment. In Ms. Whetstone's case, she's trying to settle the score by running for Congress against the incumbent, her ex-husband Representative Charles Gonzalez.

She doesn't think her campaign is revenge. "I am energized by anger, but I'm not motivated by it. I hope people understand the heart of me..." (Howard Witt, Chicago Tribune, May 31; p. 6).

We do, ma'am. The Roman poet Horace understood your heart 2000 years ago when he wrote, "When you look over your own sins, your eyes are clouded.... Why, when you view the failings of your friends, are you as keen of sight as an eagle? But, on the other hand, the result for you is that they, too, in turn peer into your faults" (I.III. 25-28).

Which is what I'm doing here. Oh, I forgot to mention she's been married three times. A marriage counselor? "We who teach will be judged with greater strictness" (James 3:1). Thank God for common sense...and for counselors who have their own lives together!

## June 3

Last Sunday many Christian churches observed Pentecost, remembering the coming of the Holy Spirit upon Jesus' first disciples. The third person in the Trinity, the Holy Spirit is credited with working saving faith in Jesus Christ (1 Corinthians 12:3).

Religious people make claims about having the Spirit, but how do you get the Holy Spirit? Here's a quotation I expect you'll find troubling. "We should and must constantly maintain that God will not deal with us except through His external Word and sacrament" (Smalcald Articles, III. VIII. 10). That comes from Martin Luther and was adopted in 1580 as an official statement of the Lutheran Church 's understanding of the Bible.

My follow-up question: Whether you agree or not, why? What is your basis for rejecting or agreeing with this or any other religious statement? Have you thought through your beliefs on the basis of biblical texts, church teaching, history and logic?

I'm leaving this subject hanging...except for one thing to factor into your thoughts. When you're really down, when you're hurting and need some divine help and hope, it's sure nice to know where you can go and what you can read and hear to be touched by the Holy Spirit.

## **June 4**

Good luck to you, Smarty Jones, as you go for the Triple Crown! We'll watch you run to win, muscles straining, hoofs pounding, jockey urging, owners hoping, bettors gasping. Know it or not, Smarty, the pressure's on!

It's on us, too. Day-in and day-out we strain to get ahead, clocking the miles, pounding the pavement, striving to come out on top, eyeing the glory, mindful of money.

In theology we call that the Law, this endless striving to prove ourselves before others and before God. That's not wrong; just know that in the last analysis, at the eternal finish, all your striving won't get you into the winner's circle. Might as well be a donkey in the Belmont Stakes.

While the Law shows us what we should do, the greatest thing about the Law is that it spotlights our deep need for God's Good News, the Gospel. The Gospel makes no threats, makes no demands and prescribes no good works that you must do to be acceptable to God. The Gospel simply invites, "Come unto Me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

Good luck, Smarty, but as for us, we're not dependent on luck. The Gospel makes us "more than conquerors" (Romans 8:37).

## **June 7**

An open letter to my daughter and son-in-law:

Dear Elizabeth and Darren,

Welcome back from your honeymoon! For a long time I intended to write a "Minute" about your marriage, but thought it wisest to wait until "the deed was done" so I could sort out my thoughts and feelings.

A good story has a lead and there's no doubt your marriage is a good story. The love both sets of parents have for you, our pride at your accomplishments, gratitude that you've both remained true to Christian devotion and worship...possible leads, but here's my lead, mystery. The simplicity of the service in the magnificent setting of the Chapel of St. Timothy and St. Titus on the Concordia Seminary campus highlighted the great mystery of Christian marriage as an expression of God's love for His church.

As I walked you down the aisle, your eyes were filled with tears of joy and you said, "This is surreal." Perhaps the best thing we can all do is keep marriage that way, surreal, dream-like, marriage as a magnificent sanctuary in which we reflect the love of God in our small, daily ways. So looking back at your joyous day, I don't quite get it, and I hope none of us presume to understand marriage fully. That, I pray, is a beginning of wisdom.

Love,

Dad

## **June 8**

A woman I know has the habit of saying, "You know, what we should do is..." and finishes the sentence with whatever the idealism de jour happens to be.

As world leaders begin talking about trade issues at their G8 meeting at Sea Island , Georgia , protesters rail against the injustices they see in global capitalism. "What we should do is...."

Perhaps, but ideals are impossible for sinners to realize, as anyone working to earn an honest living knows. In the heady days after Christ's resurrection and Pentecost, the first disciples structured an idealistic economy, pooling all their resources, each individual taking as he or she had need (Acts 2:44-45). It didn't last. Not unlike G8 protesters, Christians set ourselves up for disappointment when we don't balance heavenly ideals with the finite and sinful realities of life here on earth.

Christ in us is the balance. "For the joy that was set before Him, (He) endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God" (Hebrews 12:2). Daydreamers will end up to pining, "Shoulda, woulda, coulda." Christ in us is idealism incarnate, not in protest but in the small, helpful good works you'll do today for others toward our common good.

## **June 9**

Looking back in light of the good...

After Jesus' death, His enemies imagined the disciples might launch a PR campaign claiming He had risen from the dead, even though those disciples were hiding in fear. Now we look back through the lens of a real resurrection and we see things in the best light.

All was not peace and love when President Washington died on December 14, 1799 . While his supporters almost deified him, his detractors were less than gracious. Vice President Thomas Jefferson refused to attend the funeral and President John Adams complained that Washington 's supporters had "done themselves and their country invaluable injury by making Washington their military, political, religious and even moral Pope and ascribing everything to him." Today we put that aside and popularly remember Washington in the words of Henry Lee as, "first in war, first in peace, and first in the hearts of his countrymen."

Now the body of President Reagan lies in state in the Rotunda, beneath a painting of Washington being received into heaven, that old deification theme. Human nature won't lay to rest partisan disagreements but to lay them aside and remember the ideals that President Reagan extolled would be looking back in the light of good.

## June 10

What's so terrible about a woman getting a run in her nylons? Diane discovered one last Sunday and...horror! Picture a puppy turning his head to understand. That's me trying to figure this out. So what if I have a hole in my socks? This is why Henry Higgins sang, "Why can't a woman be more like a man?"

Could it be that this nylon nightmare expresses something very deep in a woman's soul? "Cosmetic" comes from the Greek word "cosmos," meaning an order in all things, even in the vastness of the universe. This puppy wonders, is a woman's dress a statement of how she views her place in the order of things?

Style for some is a show of come hither sexuality and materialism, but for a Christian woman style grows out of an ordered reverence for God. "Let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious" (1 Peter 3:4). If you see yourself that way, a run in your nylon signals an unwelcome disorder in your life, your life that you want properly ordered as a beloved child of God in family and community.

Could that be it?

## June 11

Vice President Cheney said of Ronald Reagan, "He was a providential man who came along just when our nation and the world needed him most." " Providence " being another name for God, Mr. Cheney subtly implies that President Reagan was a gift from God to us. The topic now is not the sin deep in us that broods against God and needs the righteousness of Christ, but something else, that civic righteousness that people of any faith or no faith can show to one another to build the common good. To that civic good God, Providence , lifted us through President Ronald Reagan.

I once preached in the National Cathedral where his public funeral is held today. As I got into my sermon, I noticed the sound of my words rolling through that long sanctuary. I played with that, improvising some sentences that ended with the word "God." After each sentence I heard "God" roll through the lofty, vaulted length of that great cathedral. "Through the church the song goes on," wrote a poet. That

the song goes on, that you and I in our time labor for the common good, the earthly good of this nation, that, too, is a gift from the same Providence.

## **June 14**

"Does that star spangled banner yet wave o'er the land of the free and the home of the brave?"

It's just a piece of cloth, but today, Flag Day we remember it's more than "just a piece of cloth." It's a symbol, a symbol of our history, often glorious but not always so, our continuing sacrifices for the common good, and our aspiration for the future.

If our eyes look up to that flag, our hearts are invited higher to the banners of the Eternal God. "You have set up a banner for those who fear You, that they may flee to it from the bow. That Your beloved ones may be delivered, give salvation by Your right hand" (Psalm 60:4-5). "His banner over me is love" (Song of Solomon 2:4).

Living and working on this earthly side of Jordan , it stirs us to look up to the stars and stripes, to that symbol of this great nation. And on both this side of Jordan and on the other side, the side to which the Savior is leading us, we thrill to live under the eternal banner of divine love.

"May we shout for joy over Your salvation, and in the name of our God set up our banners!" (Psalm 20:5)

## **June 15**

How do you feel about performance reviews at work? A fortieth anniversary today reminds us that your boss may not have a clue.

On June 15, 1964 the St. Louis Cardinals traded Ernie Broglio to the Chicago Cubs for Lou Brock. Broglio wasn't a bad player but Brock went on to be a Hall of Famer. Obviously the Cub higher-ups had their "performance reviews" all wrong and maybe the Cardinals did too. Maybe they weren't smart, just lucky.

I doubt that many of us say "God loves me" and let it roll off our back when we get a bad review. It can chew us up, that difference between the evaluation and our self-image. Get bitter or grow better? If you factor in the divine performance evaluation (you're a sinner but forgiven and forever loved), you'll move your feelings forward positively, and maybe your career as well. So whether your boss is clueless or clued-in and you don't know it (is that a possibility?), Christ's example ("He entrusted Himself to Him who judges justly," 1 Peter 2:24 ), Christ's forgiveness ("He bore our sins," 1 Peter 2:24 ) and His promise of peace ("In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world" (John 16:33 ) can help you cope and give you hope.

## **June 16**

Creeping Charlie," we call it, a weed that sends out runners, countless runners. Try as we do, we can't get rid of ol' "Creeping Charlie."

Go to a garden store and you might see a little sign for sale. "One is nearer God's heart in a garden than anywhere else on earth." In some ways that's true. This year we've got more cardinals and finches than usual in our back yard. Momma and Poppa rabbit were busy; more bunnies this year than ever before. The Creator has done so well, and you don't need church or a Bible to figure that much out.

But there's ol' "Creeping Charlie" and you know that something isn't quite right in God's garden. "Seek the Lord while He may be found" (Isaiah 55:6). You follow the runners, you struggle with all that is wrong in life, and finally you see the value of a garden guide, not a book from the garden shop but a Bible, which explains the "weeds" and offers the promise of a time and place where evil will be uprooted forever.

"His reign shall know no end, and round His pierced feet

Fair flowers of paradise extend their fragrance ever sweet."

Then we will be nearer God's heart than anywhere on earth.

## **June 17**

The Supreme Court ducked the "under God" controversy, ruling the divorced California atheist who sued on behalf of his daughter didn't have legal standing to bring the case. It's likely the issue will come back to the Court. Ironically, the Court's decision came on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Congress including "under God" in the pledge.

David Garrow, a court historian, said, "The court has been uneven on church and states issues." ( St. Louis Post-Dispatch, June 15; A6) That's correct. Church-state cases were relatively rare until the 1940's but since then there have been numerous cases with inconsistent conclusions.

Those decisions have come down on both sides of the issue. Political scientist Kenneth Wald notes that "from 1953-1969 the average Supreme Court justice cast a (vote to strictly separate church and state in) 2/3 of the cases with church-state issues." Since 1986 "that average has dropped to 45%. (Religion and Politics in the United States, p. 105)

Will that shift continue? If you believe that "Righteousness exalts a nation" (Proverbs 14:34), one question to consider is this: Does the healthy progress of religion happen more (a) when we await court decisions or (b) when you and I act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God today? (Micah 6:8)

## **June 18**

"By the time I was ten, I was totally ashamed of my father. All my friends called him names: Quasi-Modo, hunchback, monster.... My father was born with something called parastremmatic dwarfism. I hated to be seen with him. By the time I was seventeen I was blaming all my problems on my father."

When friends told her she was wrong, she did a u-turn. In a speech she gave at graduation, she confessed, "Father, I owe you a big apology. I based my love for you on what I saw.... I forgot to look at the one part of you that meant the most, the big, big heart God gave you. ...I want you to know I could not have had a better father. You were always there for me, and no matter how badly I hurt you, you still showed up. Thank you!"

"For the first time, I saw my father through God's eyes, and I felt honored to be seen with him."

You can find Candace Carteen's true story in a great series of books, "God Allows U-Turns."

Say a prayer this weekend, even now, that God will give our country more fathers who have His heart and more children who will see their fathers through God's eyes.

## **June 21**

The blessings of order...

On this date, June 21 in 1783, the Continental Congress was debating a crisis. The Revolutionary War was over but many American soldiers had not been paid. So 80 soldiers had armed themselves and marched on the federal capitol, then in Philadelphia . When Congress asked the state of Pennsylvania to send militia to stop them, Pennsylvania refused. Not feeling safe, Congress moved the federal government to Princeton , New Jersey . A month later they moved to Annapolis , then to Trenton , and in 1785 to New York City .

Out of all that came 3 aspects of civil order that we take for granted today. First, the subordination of the military to civil control. Second, the location of the national capital in a special district and not in a state. Third, the fact that residents of that special District of Columbia cannot vote in federal elections.

From cover to cover the Bible is about order. The Ten Commandments, for example, prescribe the orderly life that honors God and benefits us all. A settled federal government is a blessing and so is a society that counts order as one of its blessings. What happens to our life together if we all become, as Steve Martin described himself, "a wild and crazy guy?"

## **June 22**

Back in grade school, our teachers took care to instruct us on the proper way to open a new textbook. Today is the official release of President Clinton's book, "My Life." Will you buy it? If you do, what will be your way of opening and reading "My Life?" For that matter, how do you approach any book?

Francis Bacon (1561-1626) wrote, "Crafty men despise studies; simple men admire them, and wise men use them.... Read not to contradict and confute, nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider.

Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested." ("On Studies")

Without books theological understanding is impossible. St. Paul wrote to Timothy, "When you come, bring...my scrolls, especially the parchments" (1 Timothy 4:13 ). Even theological reading requires discernment: "Of making many books there is no end, and much study wears the body. Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep His commandments, for God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil" (Ecclesiastes 12:10 -14)

That said, maybe I'm missing the more fundamental question: Do you read books?

## **June 23**

A key to relationships is not simply spending time together but how you spend time together, specifically how you look at each other.

A scientist named Aylmer married a beautiful woman named Georgiana. They loved each other deeply and, since life was slower back in those days... The story is set in the 1700's... Aylmer and Georgiana spent much time with each other.

But...

Georgiana's beauty had one flaw, a small crimson birthmark on her left cheek. The more time they spent together, the more Aylmer obsessed about that one physical flaw. Georgiana, wanting to please her husband, also obsessed about it and consented to let her husband, the scientist, concoct a potion to remove the mark that was ruining their life. He did...and when the potion removed the birthmark, it also took Georgiana's life. Her imperfection was part of her being. His obsession with perfection destroyed the marriage and her life.

The story is called "The Birthmark" and was written by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

How will you spend your time with family today? Sin makes us rationalize our obsession with other people's imperfections. The love of Christ suggests that we look at one another in a better way. "Love covers over a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8).

## **June 24**

It was reported earlier this month that inventories are down. That's good because low inventories indicate products are being sold. Therefore production needs to increase and workers will be added to payrolls.

If a small inventory is good in economics, a large inventory is spiritually dangerous. Jesus told a parable about a farmer who decided to build up his inventory. His plan was to tear down his barns and build bigger ones. "There I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'" He died that night and his plan for a big

inventory did him no good. "One's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions" (Luke 12:15).

Call to mind that classic comedy scene from the "I Love Lucy" show. Lucy and Ethel are working in a candy store. Their job is to process the candy coming off the conveyor belt. Faster and faster the candy comes. Can't keep up! They stuff it in their pockets, stuff it in their blouses, stuff it in their mouths... Too much stuff!

That scene made us laugh. Does God smile...sadly...at the eternal vanity of the personal inventories we build?

## June 25

Are you going to a wedding this weekend? Had you lived in Wittenberg, Germany in 1525, you might have attended Martin Luther's wedding.

Celibacy didn't spark the Reformation; the rediscovery of God's underserved kindness in Christ did. Luther felt the Gospel frees us from groveling to human church rules, a freedom that could be expressed by clerical marriage. Still, it didn't appeal to Luther. So when a former nun, Katherine von Bora, suggested Luther could marry her, he thought no.

We men may be slow but sometimes we eventually get it. On June 10<sup>th</sup> Martin and Katie were betrothed, which in those days constituted a legal marriage. And at 10:00 on the 27<sup>th</sup> "Luther led Katherine to the sound of bells through the streets of Wittenberg to the parish church, where at the portal in the sight of all the people the religious ceremony was observed. Then came a banquet in the Augustinian cloister, and after dinner a dance at the town hall. In the evening there was another banquet." (Roland Bainton, Here I Stand, p. 290)

When Luther had sent out the invitations, he wrote to a friend, "You must come to my wedding. I have made the angels laugh and the devils weep." May all our marriages do the same!

## June 28

Growing up in the 50's, summer was full of time. Long, hot days and the three months of recess from school seemed endless. No complaint! My complaint is that summer now isn't much different from the rest of the year. Adults, maybe children too, don't have enough time.

"Have enough time." We routinely talk about time as a commodity, something you have or don't have enough of. "I'm running short on time." "Can you spare me a minute?" Time as a thing. That's a questionable assumption.

The Bible leads us to think of time more as a place. The first commandment tells us to have no false god in our heart. The second or third commandment, depending on how you number them, says to revere God with our lips. Heart...lips...what's next? "Remember the Sabbath day to keep it holy." That is, after heart and lips, worship

God in time. Time isn't under the commandment that says, "Thou shalt not steal" but a way of worshipping God. Time, all your time, is a place... of worship.

On Monday or any day, when you're busy or enjoying a long, slow summer day, try thinking of time as a place, your cathedral of thanks and service to God.

## **June 29**

A long-time friend is struggling with cancer. Her husband writes, "viewed from God's perspective, it is an opportunity to have Him draw us closer to Him. He is allowing a time of testing. He does not desire bad from this testing." Those are healthy words, alive with hope.

When I was working my way through school by delivering milk, an old co-worker told me this story about hope.

In those days of home delivery, if you could have asked the lady of the house where she was going in the darkness of the early morning, she would have said, "To the front door to bring in the milk."

When you ask, "How do you know that's it here?" she replies simply, "I just know it's there."

"Did you hear the milk truck or the bottles clanging?"

"No; I just know it's there!" She brushes past you, opens the door, puts her hand out into the darkness and...sure enough...the milk bottles are there.

That's hope. For my friends with cancer, for you, reach confidently into the darkness because God's word has promised you good. "Why are you downcast, O my soul? Put your hope in God, for I will yet praise Him, my Savior and my God" (Psalm 43:5).

## **June 30**

A prayer for Iraq :

Almighty God, You have created this universe, so vast that our telescopes and space explorations leave us marveling. Searching for millions of light years, have we found anything as beautiful as this earth, anything as pleasant as the home You've made for us?

Beautiful from space, the close-up picture is war and terror, hatred and grief. Today we look anxiously toward Iraq , hoping the transfer of power will bring some peace.

We have learned to draw little confidence from the news but we are taught by the Spirit to find assurance in Your word. "Who is like the Lord our God," asks the psalmist of Israel , "the One who sits enthroned on high, who stoops down to look on the heavens and the earth?" (Psalm 113) O Most High, You see the many sacrifices that have been made for peace, the lives and health lost, the labors that sometimes

seem in vain. "He raises the poor from the dust," promises the psalm, "and lifts the needy from the ash heap." Do that, we pray, in Iraq and everywhere where our sins have marred Your creation and our only ultimate hope is in Your redemption.

In the name of Your Son, the "Prince of Peace," Jesus Christ. Amen.