

2009

June 1

The troubling news today is the murder of Dr. George Tiller. Dr. Tiller was one of only a few doctors who do late term abortions, abortions during the last trimester of pregnancy. President Obama said, "However profound our differences as Americans over difficult issues, they cannot be resolved by heinous acts of violence."

What is especially troubling is that the killing happened in a church where the doctor and his wife are active members. Dr. Tiller was handing out bulletins as people came into church for worship, into a church that accepts the Ten Commandments, including the commandment that says, "Thou shalt not kill." A church professing the commandment but condoning abortion? A gunman, perhaps professing Christianity, committing murder in church?

Jesus says, "Things that cause people to sin are bound to come, but woe to that person through whom they come." Woe to a professing Christian for the sin of performing abortions and leading women to commit the sin of abortion. Woe to the gunman who was aroused to sin and may well encourage others to sinful acts of violence. Jesus concludes, "It would be better for him to be thrown into the sea with a millstone around his neck than for him to cause one of these little ones to sin. So watch yourselves." (Luke 17:1-3)

June 2

In the 1970's General Motors employed 395,000 people. After yesterday's bankruptcy G.M. will have less than 40,000 employees. Don Skidmore, president of the United Auto Workers in Willow Run, Michigan, said, "I was angry at first, then I cried, then I got angry again." (New York Times, June 2; A1)

In "The Grapes of Wrath" John Steinbeck describes dust bowl victims selling off their implements to move west. "The men were ruthless because the past had been spoiled, but the women know how the past would cry to them in the coming days. Harness, carts, seeders, little bundles of hoes. Bring `em out. Pile `em up. Load `em in the wagon. Take `em to town. Sell `em for what you can get. Sell the team and the wagon, too. No more use for anything. There's a premium goes with this pile of junk...a packet of bitterness to grow in your house and to flower, some day." (Chapter 9)

Crying, anger, bitterness. Economic pain gives a new insight on what the word "savior" means, not just a religious rescuer of our souls but a deliverer from all the ills of this broken world. Old Mrs. Joad in "Grapes of Wrath" said, "I'm jus' pain covered with skin." We need the Savior, "all our sins and griefs to bear."

June 3

Last Sunday Genesis 11 was read in church. "Let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves." My arrogant creatures, thought God. "So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth.... That is why it was called Babel—because there the Lord confused the language of the whole world."

Christian and Connor visited us last week. One-year-old Connor only has one word, "ma." Everything was "ma," sometimes with pointing. We learned that every "ma" was different.

Sometimes "ma" meant the dog, sometimes food, other times it meant mom or dad. My conversations with three-year-old Christian often broke down when he asked "why?" "It's raining today, Christian." "Opa, why?" "Mommy went to the store." "Opa, why?" A week of kiddy Babel and we loved hearing them because we love them.

Another lesson read Sunday, Acts 2, shows God undoing the Babel of different languages with the Good News of Jesus Christ. "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language?" As much as we loved hearing and learning to know our grandchildren, so much more do God's children love knowing more about Him. John 8:47 – "He who belongs to God hears what God says."

June 4

"I can surely empathize with the dealers who were not brought forward into the new company," the vice chairman of Chrysler said yesterday. "And I understand their disappointment more than you could know." The closing of auto dealerships will put some 40,000 more people out of work. (New York Times, June 4; B4)

Being laid off is a big spiritual problem. You're tempted to become angry and bitter at your former employer and that spills over to your other relationships. Whether a smart move or not, the boss had the right. That's the Law, the requirement side, the expectation side of life in this world. You do your best but sometimes you're still cut. Quite different is the Gospel. Jesus' forgiveness and hope don't prevent lay-offs but can help you cope. Tapping into His words can give you a Spirit to lay aside anger and avoid bitterness. What do they accomplish anyway, except debilitate you? And biblical meditation can give you a Spirit of hope for the day. Hope doesn't tell you exactly what will happen but hope tells you God is working all things for the good of those who love Him (Romans 8:28).

"Let those also who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to a faithful Creator in doing what is right" (1 Peter 4:19).

June 5

Why go to church?

I don't have a magic answer that will convince Sunday stay-at-homes. Personally, though, I don't have as much confidence in my own spiritual insights as many people apparently have in theirs. They seem confident that they can be right spiritually on their own, apart from participating with the church in worship.

Did you ever buy something that turned out to be a lemon? So isn't it also conceivable that you could be deceived in your own individualized spirituality? A sucker is born every minute. Jesus said, "My words are Spirit and they are life" (John 6:63). Sunday worship exposes me to words from God; some of those words from God I find naturally congenial, I like them, but other words of God that worship puts before me are troubling. In that environment of engagement with the whole counsel of God, the Spirit is present, working true faith.

In my work, it's better if I can speak to more people at one time rather than speaking to them individually. I think that's also true of the Spirit. Yes, He works on solo spiritual

flights...but He's more effective when His people gather together. Yesterday the church celebrated Pentecost. "Take not Thy Holy Spirit from me" (Psalm 51:11).

June 8-12 no minutes

June 15

The length of our days is seventy years—or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away." (Psalm 90:10) Someone who did a little flying last Friday afternoon is over 70 and over 80. President George H.W. Bush celebrated his 85th birthday by jumping out of an airplane. After he landed in a grassy place near a church, he said it was "just wonderful. You feel exhilarated. It sends a message to old folks to get out and do something."

Now and then you hear about "the Catholic Bible." Roman Catholicism includes some books that many Protestants do not. Those books are called the "Apocrypha" and one of them, Ecclesiasticus, says this about health: "Better a poor man healthy and fit than a rich man tormented in body. Health and strength are better than any gold, a robust body than untold wealth. No riches can outweigh bodily health." (30:14-16) Martin Luther's view was that the Apocrypha aren't equal to Scripture but are good and useful to read. That's true of Ecclesiasticus' praise of health.

So give thanks to God for the days you feel good. Mrs. Bush told the President, "Good thing you're doing it at the church. Not too far to move you!"

June 16

Hearing about the election turmoil in Iran, we can be thankful for our American democracy. No secret balloting in Iran, no poll watchers, no independent election commission, no comparison to the United States, even with our hanging chads.

Amir Taheri wrote "The Persian Night: Iran Under the Khomeinist Revolution." In yesterday's Wall Street Journal he said that President Ahmadinejad represents "a military-security clique, which is determined to replace the Shiite clergy as the nation's ruling elite." Iranians protesting that Ahmadinejad stole the election are trying to practice some fledgling democracy. About that Mr. Taheri is clear: "The choice is now between a repressive regime based on a bizarre and obscurantist ideology and the prospect of real change and democratization. There is no halfway house." (A15) In other words, you can't have a theocracy and a true democracy.

It's a great blessing that our American constitution keeps organized religion from exercising control over the state. The founding fathers wanted nothing to do with a national church and James Madison in the Federalist Papers predicted that the free competition of denominations would make for more thriving religion in America. It has. "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's and unto God the things that are God's." (Matthew 22:21). The only theocracy I ever hope to live in will be heaven.

June 17

Monday I went out to buy a greeting card. Of course they don't sell cards in stores men like to visit, like hardware stores. Nope, have to go to a store where men don't like to linger. Of course you could go to a Hallmark store but those kind of stores are wall-to-wall cards and you don't want to spend the rest of your life looking. The goal for a guy is get in and get out. So where are the cards? I stumbled on the right aisle, and then stood there like a cow looking at a new fence. Funny card or serious card? Better check out both kinds. So you start pulling out cards, opening them, deciding if it fits the person or not. Card after card, pull 'em out, open 'em up, and keep looking. Am I enjoying this?

Monday I did. Dale, the woman has given you 36 years of her life, though much of the time you've been too dense to realize what a blessing God has given you in Diane. So I bought the card that I decided describes us. Happy anniversary, Diane. "He who finds a wife finds what is good and receives favor from the Lord." (Proverbs 18:22) After going through all those cards I should also have bought some hand sanitizer!

June 18

The job performance review: You go in to your boss and are told, "You're doing well on this, this, and that, but we've got a real problem here. You're not measuring up." You walk out hurt, hurt especially because you know these performance judgments are so here-and-now, so eternally irrelevant. "It is 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)

But so it is. Praise the Lord for being saved by grace but you and I are constantly called to account for our works. The boss, the spouse, the IRS, your conscience says, "you should have done it but didn't." So when President Obama yesterday revealed his proposals for new regulations for the financial industry, it's a reminder of the importance of works, on Wall Street and at your level of life. "You're only as good as your last show."

"We must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad." (2 Corinthians 5:10). That's why grace is such a thin thread to hang on to. Ours is0 a conflicted way to live...but that's the way it is on this side of eternity.

June 19

"God Allows U-Turns" is a great collection of inspirational stories gathered by Allison Bottke. The following comes from Candace Carteen.

"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."

But U-turns happen. At the senior prom her friends told her how wonderful her dad was, how he always had time to listen to their problems. When she graduated, she gave the valedictory speech. "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."

"Fathers, do not exasperate your children; instead, bring them up in the training and instruction of the Lord." (Ephesians 6:4)

He did-and she came to see it.

June 22

"And God said, 'Let the water teem with living creatures.' So God created the great creatures of the sea and every living and thing with which the water teems. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them and said, 'Be fruitful and increase in number and fill the water in the seas....' Then God said, 'Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea....'" (From Genesis 1)

Every day since God created the heavens and the earth, He has looked down but on June 22, 1969 His eyes spotted a fire. God had put some waters into what people later named the Cuyahoga River. God had made it very good but man proved a poor caretaker, for decades filling the river with oil-soaked debris. 40 years ago today something, perhaps a spark from a train, ignited the river. That's why they called Cleveland the "mistake by the lake" but God wondered more about the people He had made.

Today God looks down and that the Cuyahoga River is again very good. It's thriving with over 60 species of fish, beavers, nests of bald eagles and herons. Does God see good stewardship of His creation where you live?

June 23

A famous story was heard Sunday in many churches, Jesus calming a storm on the Sea of Galilee. It has inspired hymns, like "Jesus, Savior, pilot me over life's tempestuous sea."

But here's a puzzle. Before Jesus stilled the storm, the Bible says, "He was in the stern, asleep on the cushion. And they woke Him and said to Him, 'Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?'" While the Bible teaches us to say that Jesus is God... God asleep? Psalm 121 says, "He who watches you will not slumber." So what if you pray to God for help and His answer is...snoring?

Jesus, the Son of God, came into our world as a true human being. He slept; that's what we humans do. The story shows He's one of us and it shows that this man is God; He calmed the storm. Today Jesus doesn't sleep or eat, He's glorified ("He who watches you will not slumber"), but He could sleep or eat because He's still God and man. The hymn "Be Still, My Soul," says, "The waves and winds still know His voice who ruled Him while He was below. Not quite right. The God-man is still below. Though He's not seen, He's awake to help you through the storms of your life. And He's not snoring!

June 24

Hi, Christian here! Opa was grumpy yesterday. Grumpy grandpa. He got sad when he read the newspaper. "It's official: TV's Jon and Kate will divorce. The parents of 8-year-old twins and 5-year-old sextuplets announced their separation on Monday night's episode of

their TLC reality show.... Jon and Kate said they keep their home in Wernersville, Pa., and would alternate the days they will stay there with the children." (USA Today, June 23; D1)
"Opa, what does 'divorce' mean? 'Alternate days?' Why?"

Opa put that paper down and picked up another. Sad face went to scowl. "Matthew McConaughey and his girlfriend, Camila Alves, are expecting another baby. Writes McConaughey: Camila and I are expecting our second child, bringing more life into the world, making more to live for. The future looks bright as the family grows." (Omaha World Herald, June 23; 2E). "Now what, Opa?" Opa sang, "Will you still need me when I'm 64?"

Then Opa read, "Ryan O'Neal plans to marry Farrah Fawcett, who is struggling to overcome cancer. The 68-year-old actor said...he asked his longtime companion to marry him, and 'she's agreed.' O'Neal said they will tie the knot 'as soon as she can say yes.'"

"Connor, what's with Opa?" Connor said, "Ma, Ma! Da, Da!" Then Opa smiled. "That's right Connor. 16-months old and you understand."

June 25

One of the first things John Baugh had to do when he went to Stanford for a one-year fellowship was find an apartment. Several phone conversations were promising, but "I showed up and was told nothing was available." Baugh, an African-American, took the experience in a positive direction and researched discrimination because of the way a person speaks.

Judges 12 tells that Gilead defeated Ephraim. "The Gileadites captured the fords of the Jordan leading to Ephraim, and whenever a survivor of Ephraim said, 'Let me cross over,' the Gileadites asked him, 'Are you an Ephraimite?' If he replied, 'No,' they said, 'All right, say, 'Shibboleth.'" If he said, 'Sibboleth,' because he could not pronounce the word correctly, they seized him and killed him...."

When Jesus was hauled before the Sanhedrin, Peter was accused of being an accomplice of Jesus. Peter denied, saying he didn't know Jesus, but people said, "Surely you are one of them; your accent gives you away." (Matthew 26:73)

It took John Baugh half that year to find an apartment but his research isn't stuck on discrimination. He wants to teach young people to speak standard English as well as their native vernacular. Do you and I discriminate by speech patterns? "God is no respecter of persons." (Acts 10:34; Kenneth Cooper, Washington University in St. Louis, Summer 2009, p. 15ff.)

June 26

Two high-profile deaths yesterday: Michael Jackson and Farrah Fawcett, celebrity reminders that we all must die.

I remember one elderly person who wouldn't talk about it. Mrs. Ford was a member of my first congregation and a fine Christian woman. Because she was home-bound, I'd take communion to her every month. Whenever I'd bring up the topic of death, she wouldn't go there, which

certainly was her right. Still today, I wonder if she wouldn't talk about it because she was terrified of death.

A leading theologian in my denomination wrote this long ago. "Many preachers picture the Christian as a person who does not fear death. That is a serious misrepresentation, because the great majority of Christians are afraid to die. If a Christian does not fear death and declares that he is ready to die at any time, God has bestowed a special grace upon him. Some have expressed this sentiment before their physician told them that they would not live another night, but after that they were seized with a terrible fear." (C.F.W. Walther, Law and Gospel, 313)

"Hold Thou Thy cross before my closing eyes. Shine through the gloom and point me to the skies. Heaven's morning breaks and earth's vain shadows flee. In life and death, O Lord, abide with me."

June 29

I can't begin to imagine the betrayal, the anger and the despair that the victims of Bernard Madoff are feeling. Some were personal friends whom he betrayed. Others thought they were fortunate to have their life-savings invested with such a successful money manager only to have their futures stolen. The charities that relied on his investing found themselves relying on a crook.

Today federal judge Denny Chin will sentence Mr. Madoff. Although his lawyers brazenly asked for only 12 years, he could be given 150 years. But what difference does it make? The people who lost money would never get it all back. That's a sad demonstration that earthly justice is imperfect. Prison terms don't restore the wholeness destroyed by crime.

When the Bible talks about "righteousness," it's talking about justice and wholeness. What we do wrong against the law of God, against His clear commandments, makes us unjust before God. "The wages of sin is death" but the Judge forgives us because He sentenced His Son, man like us and also God able to fully pay the price (Romans 6:23). "Let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream" (Amos 5:24). God's river of justice rolls to us like a river because of Jesus Christ but earthly justice can be a trickling creek.

June 30

Today is an official holiday in Iraq. The country is celebrating the withdrawal of American combat troops from urban areas and relocation to bases in less populated areas. We should pray that today will not prove to be the beginning of regression into sectarian civil war.

Renewed violence has killed over 200 Iraqis in the last two weeks. "We are very scared" said one citizen, afraid that the Iraqi security forces will give up any pretence of neutrality and become factional thugs. On the other hand, an American officer said, "They really didn't seem to need us anymore. A lot of times, their intelligence is better than ours." (Wall Street Journal, June 29; A9)

For sure, pray. Pray that we understand that civil government has a role in the Creator's care for all people, "that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Timothy 2:2). Pray that the Iraqi government will not use force for sectarian repression but for the promotion of what is good and right. "Rulers do not bear the sword for no reason. They are God's servants, agents of wrath, to bring punishment on the wrong-doer" (Romans 13:4). And invoke this promise for our troops. "The Lord will keep you from all harm; He will watch over your life" (Psalm 121:7).