

May 1

What do you think about when you see a cross? I hope all that Jesus endured for you. By itself it's just a cross, but when you remember it becomes a powerful symbol.

What do you think about when you see the American flag? I hope you remember this imperfect country with us imperfect citizens is still a most blessed place of freedom. When you remember the ideals of America, the flag becomes a powerful symbol.

This week on the west lawn of the United States Capitol volunteers are reading the Bible out loud, from cover to cover, from Genesis to Revelation. The readers include Congressmen and staffers. Is this Bible reading marathon going to make a difference in America? The Bible is not magic, not abracadabra words. The biblical message requires faith and action, not just reading. But the reading is symbolic, saying that this country needs to hear and humbly live by the word of the Lord.

This week's Bible reading is oriented toward the west, the direction the country grew to be great. "Go west, young man, go west," said Horace Greeley. The greatest future for us lies in the biblical message. It's only a book...unless you invest this symbolism with your reading energy and faith. "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24).

May 2

Yesterday I gave the chapel sermon at Concordia Seminary. The text assigned for the day was from John 14. You may know the passage because it's often used at funerals. Jesus says in John 14:1, "Let not your heart be troubled."

Preparing the sermon I noticed something interesting. Look at John 14 in its original Greek... You probably won't be doing that, but some of us were trained to... Look at John 14 in Greek and you see that the chapter is full of plurals. For example, in the sentence "Let not your heart be troubled," "your" is a plural. What interested me was the word "heart." It's not plural; it's singular. Some new Bibles translate it plural, "Do not let your hearts be troubled" (NIV), but in Greek it's singular, "heart" not "hearts."

So Jesus is saying, "All you disciples out there, My people, you have a common heart amongst yourselves. Let your common heart be calm." From that it follows that when one of us is troubled, the calm heart of all God's people brings serenity.

In one way all that is a little minor translation point, but in another way it shows one way God brings calm to troubled hearts: through you and me. "Thou wilt keep him in perfect peace whose heart is stayed on Thee" (Isaiah 26:3).

May 3

Today is the national day of prayer.

Have you had this experience? You work so frantically right up to the time you leave for vacation that the first days of your time off are not restful?

Prayer without preparation is like that. The learned Jewish scholar Abraham Heschel wrote, "The pious men of old used to wait an hour before praying in order to concentrate their thoughts upon their Father in heaven." ("A Passion for the Truth", p. 92).

Before facing the rigors of daily life, seeking your Savior's help is a must. "Thou art coming to a King," says a hymn about prayer. I've learned that vacation is more satisfying when I start to slow down some days before leaving home. Before you go to the King, clear your mind, focus on what you're about to do. You'll find your prayer more intimate, more restful.

Jesus, continue to teach Your disciples how to pray. Amen.

May 4

What are the odds? In tomorrow's Kentucky Derby the odds for some horses will be good, but for other horses the odds will be so long that the horses mother probably wouldn't bet on him.

The Bible has references aplenty to the power and the beauty of horses. Like Derby horses prancing to run, Job 39:13 says the horse "paws fiercely, rejoicing in his strength and charges into the fray." Jeremiah 4:13 talks about "horses...swifter than eagles."

Is it in contrast, then, that the prophet Zechariah says, "Rejoice greatly, O daughter of Zion...your king comes to you righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey." (9:9). Is that why Jesus rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday on a donkey, to contrast His humility to a world that fawns over strength and beauty?

In Revelation 19:11 the heavenly Christ is pictured splendidly on a white horse...but He rides that horse after the donkey. The crown comes after the cross. "The Lord's pleasure is not in the strength of the horse...the Lord delights in those who fear Him, who puts their hope in His unfailing love" (Psalm 147:10-11).

Imagine betting on a jockey who rides a donkey? What really are the odds?

May 7

Herbert Morrison was a reporter for WLS radio in Chicago . 70 years ago yesterday, May 6, 1937, Morrison was broadcasting live from Lakehurst , New Jersey . The occasion was the arrival of the Hindenburg, a huge German dirigible. Huge! 804 feet long, 135 wide. As that great airship was mooring, routinely so it seemed, it suddenly burst into flames. 35 people on board were killed. A Navy crewman on the ground also died. As the tragedy unfolded before his eyes, Morrison cried out, "Oh, the humanity!"

Jesus was once asked about an accident. A tower had fallen, killing 18 people. He said, "Unless you repent, you too will all perish" (Luke 13:5). Death is always

lurking near us, not just the possibility of an accident, but an eternal death, an eternal separation from the kindness of God. Acknowledging how close death is...and then trusting the One who died for our sins and rose to give us eternal life... That's repentance. Oh, how humanity needs repentance!

Our Father in heaven, deliver us from every evil of body and soul. Amen.

May 8

I'm not internet savvy, but I think you call them chat rooms, places where communities form on-line around some common topic. A participant doesn't have to reveal much except for an opinion he or she chooses to venture. I wonder what happens when a contributor drops out. Missed very much? Does the community feel a loss? I doubt it.

Eastern Market burned down Monday of last week. Eastern Market was a farmers' market kind of place that served residents of Capitol Hill in Washington D.C. The building was a historic landmark, going back to 1873. Unlike a chat room, Eastern Market was a flesh and blood, these are our neighbors place. The president of the Capitol Hill Community Foundation, Nicky Cymrot, said, "Eastern Market is the heart and soul, the center of our community. Everyone who lives here interacts with it regularly. For many people, it's the center of their social life on the weekends. The shock of having it gone is traumatic to people living in this community." (New York Times, May 4; A16)

"Love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39). If my thesis is true that there's not much grief when someone drops out of a chat room, then maybe we should think about the physical places where we invest our energies. Here's to rebuilding Eastern Market!

May 9

Hi, Christian here! Something new every day. Something new I do every day. Last week I made Mommy and Daddy very happy. I slept through the whole night. Tummy down, diaper end up, and I slept and slept and slept. I felt so good and Mommy and Daddy were happy with wonderful little me!

Opa says that sometimes he has trouble sleeping through the night. What do you big people do when you wake up at night? We babies toss and turn because we think something is wrong. Do you big people toss and turn like that? We babies cry because we're scared and alone. Do you big people feel like that? When we babies wake up and cry, Mommy comes and tells me, "Christian, dear, it's alright." Who do you big people listen to and hear it's alright?

Opa likes hymn verses. Opa says, "When in the night I sleepless lie, my soul with heavenly thoughts supply; Let no ill dreams disturb my rest, No powers of darkness me molest.

"Oh, may my soul in Thee repose, and may sweet sleep mine eyelids close, sleep that shall me more vig'rous make to serve my God when I awake."

Opa, maybe you should try sleeping in the baby position!

May 10

Barbara Brown Taylor is an Episcopal priest. In her newest paperback, "Leaving Church," she recalls a time when she was overly busy. "My daily contact with creation had shrunk to the distance between my front door and the driveway." At the end of those busy days, she took walks, but usually paid attention to nothing except the concrete ahead of her. "Only then did I smell the honeysuckle that had been there all along..." From that smell she draws the conclusion, which I borrow for my point today, "The same God who had breathed the world into being was still breathing" (p. 5).

"The Lord God formed the man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being" (Genesis 2:7). Indeed, the sights and smells that surround you this spring day are God's breath to you of the fullness of life.

Why did Ms. Brown miss it for so long? "The obvious answer was that I was a priest, with more crucial things to do than to go for a walk around the park." How we religious forget our creaturely status! Our faith will be more appealing to others and vital to us if we go outdoors today and breath more slowly and more deeply.

May 11

Years ago, a March day I think, I set out to drive to my mom's house near Chicago . When it started to snow, Interstate 57 quickly became packed with snow and was dangerously slick. Bitter cold winds were blowing across the farm fields, blowing hard. Traffic crept along at 5 miles an hour. Exit ramps were treacherous, so I couldn't turn around. I couldn't call anyone, no cell phones then. I was scared...and I got angry, really angry. My mother's a stickler for being on time... I was angry about the tongue lashing I was sure to get.

The 4 hour trip turned into a 10 hour ordeal. Wow, I sharpened my tongue to answer every conceivable criticism for being late. So when I finally pulled into her driveway, I was ready for her...or so I thought. She came running at me, tears pouring down her cheeks, gave me a big hug, and sobbing, gasping for air, she stammered, "I thought something had happened to you." I wasn't ready for a mother's love.

Scared, angry, defensive...Because we so easily forget that we are loved, we set aside this weekend to thank God for His love through our mothers.

May 14

I may not have made the right decision, but I had a reason for doing what I did.

After church yesterday I went to a nursery and picked up two flats of groundcover, ajuga to specific. Ajuga has rich purple leaves, a perfect planting for one of our borders, and it's pricey. When I was paying with cash, I came up \$1.85 short. "I think I've got enough change in the car," I told the clerk. Against my hopes, she

wasn't cutting me any slack. I guess clerks forgive for pennies but not for \$1.85. Up steps a young woman. "Here's \$2," she said. "No, I protested," sincerely. "I've probably got it in the car." "No, take it. I'd just waste it on coffee tomorrow anyway." After a little more back and forth, I took it.

I found \$1.85 and a bit more in the car but decided not to take it back. Right or wrong decision, the Lord only knows, but here's my reason. Her gift was an act of grace, a reminder that there are times to take someone's kindness when you're falling short. You can apply that to many things in life, not just money. The kind woman gave me \$1.85 on Sunday, the day we're reminded that God steps in with grace because our accounts with Him always come up short. Thank You!

May15

Attorneys general from eight states have accused MySpace of not doing enough to keep sexual predators off its site. MySpace is like our old high school year books. Young people list their activities, their interests, their pictures, and the like on this interactive site, which makes the accusation from the attorneys general so serious. "I tell parents every day that MySpace is a dangerous place for teenagers," says Lawrence Wasden, the attorney general in Idaho. Richard Blumenthal, attorney general in Connecticut, thinks that thousands of sexual predators are using MySpace (New York Times, May 15, C2).

Eli was an old priest, and as religious types can be, he was forbearing. "Aw, they're just kids, let them play." Well, Eli's two boys did play. The Bible says, "Eli's sons were scoundrels, they had no regard for the Lord." God's patience with the parent had run out. "Why do you honor your sons more than Me?" (1 Samuel 2:12-27). Sons Hophni and Phineas died the same day. Shame and defeat came upon Israel.

Unlike Hophni and Phineas, the teens who use MySpace are not scoundrels, just naïve. What is the same is the duty of parents to sometimes be tough with their children. And that can present a special challenge to religious people who confuse parental patience with indulgence.

May 16

"In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world." (John 16:33)

Hide that in the inner chamber of your heart and you'll get through the day. Jesus' sayings are sometimes hard to understand, so when He promised to speak openly about the Father, it was a high religious moment for the disciples. "Now you are speaking clearly.... Now we can see that You know all things...." We do have those great "now" moments, times when Christian faith seems so clear, so applicable, so relevant.

Tempering the moment, Jesus said, "I am leaving the world; I am going back to the Father." Offsetting those high religious moments, we have troubled times when Jesus doesn't seem near, when the "now" of religious insight gives way to doubt about His presence for our good. Name the situation where God seems absent in your life. The "now" of insight into the ways of God becomes the "back then," before

faith bumped up against the real world. It's in those times when Jesus seems distant but the world so oppressively near that His Spirit can form in you more mature faith. Then hear the words hidden deep in your heart, "In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."

May 17

When we kids were having troubles, Mom used to say, "The sun is still shining." We all have our cloudy days, and for those days it's interesting to think about clouds in the Bible.

After the Exodus from Egypt, "there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain... The Lord descended to the top of Mount Sinai" (Exodus 19:16, 20). God came close to His people in that cloud, but by that cloud He protected them from seeing His glory. No one can see His glory and live (Exodus 33:20).

When Jesus took His disciples up to the Mount of Transfiguration, "a cloud appeared and covered them... A voice came from the cloud, saying, 'This is My Son, whom I have chosen. Listen to Him'" (Luke 9:34). The divine cloud tells us to hear the words of Jesus.

Today the Church remembers the Ascension of Christ. "He was taken up before their very eyes, and a cloud hid Him from their sight" (Acts 1:9). The divine cloud again! Jesus was taken into the glory of God, the glory He set aside when He came to earth with forgiveness, love and hope. Today the Church is drawn on by the words of the ascended One, "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27). Yes, "The sun is shining!"

May 18

Today is Commencement here at Concordia Seminary. So congratulations to graduates here and far! Who really graduates, the student...or the parents? Obviously the student, on to high school, to college, to a career, on to a changing world. But mom and dad graduate as well...to ever less control, to a nest that can be empty save for memories.

Some years ago I was checking in electronically at the Portland airport. I swiped my card and before I knew what was happening, a helpful agent was punching the screen for me. Too helpful. I put my hand on her shoulder and said, "Mom, I can do it myself." She replied, "Oh, I'm sorry. I raised 5 kids." I felt like the sixth.

Here's to the parents who now face the herculean task of letting go. My daughter once asked me if I wanted to live her life for her. "Well, yes I do," I answered but I couldn't, I can't, and, for better or worse, she has to punch her own check-in screens and whatever else life brings her.

Experts say that graduation causes a kind of grief. Something's being lost. Here's to the parents who have to deal with it. "Here we have no lasting city" (Hebrews 13:14).

May 21

Columnist Elinor Markgraf wrote about her bout with pneumonia. Confined to her home, she turned to books. "I can't think for a minute why I planned to read the letters from Harry Truman to his wife, Bess. Initially, Harry seemed like a fine guy, concerned and doting toward his wife and child. But after a couple hundred letters, I started feeling downright sorry for Bess."

Ha! When I discovered Diane had kept all the letters I wrote her when we were dating, I felt sorry for her...and embarrassed by my cloddish style. We still laugh about it, that bundle of boring letters. No one's ever described me as romantic.

Still, she kept the letters. Maybe she saw something in our relationship, something she's nourished for over 30 years. I thank heaven for her patience, waiting as she has for me to realize what a wonderful thing our long, worked-at marriage is.

Wrote Ms. Markgraf, "Why she saved the darn things is beyond me." I think the answer is love, and most men are slow understanding it. (The Oregonian, May 15, 2004 ; C5)

May 22

May 23

Years ago my wife and I stood and watched our daughter, recently graduated from law school, drive off to live the life God entrusted to her. Parents do that. We stand and watch the kids leave, whether they're on their way to kindergarten, high school, college or career. It leaves you with a bit of a hollow feeling, wondering, "What more can we do?"

The answer? Wave good-bye, go back into the house and pray. "We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thessalonians 1:2-3).

As our children graduate and move on, dear Father, let us never graduate from praying for them. Let them be productive and persevere through the faith, hope and love that are in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Pray for a grad. That will make this minute work!

May 24

Diane and I are debating whether or not to put vinyl siding on our house. There are plenty of reasons for putting it on, but what bugs us is that it's not real.

This past Wednesday London's Science Museum opened an exhibition celebrating 100 years of plastics. In 1907 a chemist named Leo Baekeland created Bakelite, a phenol-formaldehyde polymer resin. Other scientists had tried to create a totally synthetic material but Mr. Baekeland was the first to succeed. After 100 years we now have plastic bottles, Styrofoam cups, PVC piping, Tupperware, cellophane,

Formica, and on and on goes the list. Plastic products are all around us, and they've made life better. (St. Louis Post-Dispatch, May 23; A12)

Idols were synthetic too. "As for an idol, a craftsman casts it, and a goldsmith overlays it with gold" (Isaiah 40:18). Is our culture making a plastic God, a throwaway version of the old idols? I'm sure we all project onto our understanding of God things that really come not from Him but from our own psychological makeup. So our eternally important challenge is to seek to know God as He really is. On Pentecost Sunday the Church will pray, "Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the faithful." Vinyl siding? Maybe, but I need a God who is real, not plastic.

May 25

About a week ago the Board of Regents of Concordia Seminary heard a presentation about our facilities from Steve Mudd. Steve is an architect with experience in construction and facilities management. He said the natural tendency is to abandon something that is in need of major repair. Then he named places on our campus where we've abandoned rather than repair.

George Will recalled sociologist Daniel Bell's worry. "Capitalism flourishes because of virtues that its flourishing undermines. Its success requires thrift, industriousness and deferral of gratifications, but that success produces abundance, expanding leisure and the emancipation of appetites, all of which weaken capitalism's moral requisites." (Belleville News-Democrat, May 22; A4). The work of maintaining healthy capitalism is harder than living off its benefits. Does the same hold true for patriotism? Has the cost led us to abandon the virtues that patriotism requires?

This Sunday the Christian church observes Pentecost, the day when the Holy Spirit of God was poured out upon the first disciples. That Spirit still comes today through reading, hearing and believing the Bible, but all that takes time and effort. Does that cost you too much to keep fidelity to God and Christ in good repair? Are we taking the route of our sinful nature, so that rather than work at the spiritual life we're slowly abandoning it?

Have a restful and thoughtful holiday. I'll be back Tuesday.

May 29

Hi, Christian here! Last week Mommy and Daddy put some new things on my legs. I think you big people call them "shoes." Whatever. Daddy and Mommy set me down in the mall last week, turned away for a moment, and I was off running. Maybe that's when they decided that I need running shoes. Mommy put these new, bigger shoes on. Can I move with these big things? I slowly lifted one leg up and put it forward. That worked OK. Then the other leg, slowly forward. That worked too. Hey! I can do this. Before you could say, "Hokey Pokey," I was toddling faster than before.

Opa said he once preached about love. Years later a man told him the sermon was so inspiring that he left his wife for the woman he really loved. So Opa said, "Christian, be careful about telling people to try something new."

Opa said there's a way to know what new things to try and what new things to stay away from. Opa quoted the Bible. "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to Your word. I seek You with all my heart; do not let me stray from Your commandments" (Psalm 119:9-10). And that is how to toddle forward!

May 30

In troubled Iraq , the Anbar province is especially troubled. Last year the province saw 108 attacks every week upon U.S. forces.

James Janega of the Chicago Tribune reported last week that "Sunni tribal leaders met in a guarded compound on the edge of town, guests of an up-and-coming young sheik bent on avenging the murder of his father and the disappearance of two brothers at the hands of...Al Qaeda. 'We started remembering what had happened and how things went, and we decided to fight,' said a spokesman for the young sheik, Sattar Abu Risha." Because of their disgust at Al Qaeda, the number of police officers in the capital Rimadi has risen from 200 last summer to 8,000 police officers. Attacks have dropped from 108 per week a year ago to seven in the same week this year. (Chicago Tribune, May 27; p. 8)

I've known people who look at problems in society and complain somebody ought to do something. Then they go back to their daily routines and contribute nothing to making things better. Not every truth for living comes from the Christian church. Are not these sheiks reminding us, we who are committed to justice in the name of Christ, that the evil in our world is so great that we need to band together and do something about it?

May 31

In recent weeks high school associations have been hosting state track meets. Tyler Carter of Tuscola High School did well in Illinois . He won three medals, in the triple jump, the 110 hurdles, and with the 800 relay team. Young Mr. Carter said, "Healthwise today I felt almost perfect. I was pain-free today and running, jumping on it felt great. The warm weather definitely helped a lot, too." (Charleston News-Gazette, May 27; D1)

Diane and I pay some attention to such reports because our daughter had a distinguished career in track and cross country. When Katie and husband Charlie visited us last weekend, the first thing they did was to change clothes and go out for a run.

As I kid in parochial school, I had to memorize 1 Timothy 4:8, "Bodily exercise profiteth little, but godliness is profitable unto all things." The verse was presented, or at least I heard it, as dismissing sports and exercise. No, the verse says that physical exercise is of some profit. Didn't God create us as body, soul and spirit? Didn't Jesus come into real flesh? Don't our young athletes remind us that stewardship of God's gift includes appropriate exercise for your body? When was the last time you worked up a sweat as a faithful steward of what God has given you?

