

September 1

What will be on your mind this Labor Day weekend?

Here are some invitations to weave a spiritual consciousness into the coming days of rest. "Be still and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). Jesus invites, "Come with Me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest" (Mark 6:31). Again He says, "Come to Me all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28).

These days can well be a time to reflect on where you have been. "You gave me life and showed me kindness, and in Your providence watched over my spirit" (Job 10:12). "Thus far has the Lord helped us" (1 Samuel 7:12).

Spiritual reflection offers a promise: "In repentance and rest is your salvation, in quietness and trust is your strength" (Isaiah 30:15).

Such meditation these days can renew your attitude, whatever happens to be going on in your life. "I will rejoice in the Lord, I will be joyful in God my Savior. The Sovereign Lord is my strength" (Habakkuk 3:18-19).

"God rested from all the work of creating what He had done" (Genesis 2:2). God rested to show that He identifies with our pattern of work and rest. Rest your thoughts with Him these next days. I'll be back Tuesday.

September 5

Steve Irwin, the "Crocodile Hunter", was killed by a stingray over the weekend. 44 years old, he is survived by his wife Terri and two small children.

When a spouse dies, it's not unusual for the widow or widower to flash some anger at the dear departed. "You left me to struggle with the kids and bills all alone. How could you? I remember reading about a new widow who was washing the dishes when it all well-up within her. She threw a dish and yelled angrily at her dead husband. It's natural. You're left feeling helpless and without control so you cry out and sometimes with anger.

Naomi became a widow and said, "Don't call me Naomi (which means 'pleasant'). Call me Mara (which means 'bitter') because the Almighty has made my life very bitter" (Ruth 1:20). Naomi's daughter-in-law Ruth, herself a widow, stayed with her and eventually it was said, "Praise be to the Lord who has this day not left you without a kinsman-redeemer. He will renew your life..." (4:14).

Sandra Aldrich wrote "Will I Ever Be Whole Again? Surviving the Death of Someone You Love." She told me she wasn't comforted when people quoted "All things work together for good" (Romans 8:28). She believed it but wasn't ready to hear it right away. Grief takes time and people understanding people.

September 6

"One is nearer God's heart in a garden than any place else on earth," goes an old gardener saying. If that's true, truth hurts.

People love to garden. Daniel Schreber was a reform minded medical doctor who lived in Leipzig, Germany in the 19th century. He pioneered sporting associations that met in open, grassy areas. After Streber died a teacher, Heinrich Karl Gsell suggested parceling out some of that green sport space for small, family garden plots. The little garden plots came to be called "Schrebergardens" and they can still be seen all over Germany.

When Diane and I moved onto the campus of Concordia Seminary last year, we put a garden in the back yard. This year our garden produced basil, parsley, radishes, tomatoes, asparagus, plenty of flowers AND for me two serious bouts with poison ivy, a crippling month of back spasms from moving rocks, and last Sunday afternoon my index finger crushed between two rocks.

After Adam sinned, God told him, "Cursed is the ground because of you; through painful toil you will eat of it all the days of your life" (Genesis 3:17). A computer expert named Klaus Schuett says his Schrebergarden is great fun but it works him to death. Nearer God's heart in a garden??? ("Abendzeitung," August 8, 2006;7). Thanks to Dr. Harvey Mirly for mending my broken finger!

September 7

This is one of those news items that gets into my head and makes me think. News services report that some Christians are starting a blog on which they intend to bring Christian values to the support of the Democratic candidates. The blog, Faithfuldemocrats.com, is the creation of several nationally known political and religious figures. What's rumbling around in my head is this question: Why are eclectic religious values being yanked in to support Democratic candidates? Let me hasten to add in capital letters: THE SAME IS TRUE FOR REPUBLICANS. WHY DO SOME CHRISTIANS THINK YOU'RE NOT A TRUE BELIEVER IF YOU DON'T VOTE REUBLICAN?

Now that I've been bipartisan, I'm hoping that most people will realize the theological truth that supports the First Amendment's so-called "separation of church and state." That is the Bible's teaching that the rule of government is instituted by God and through government God works for the good of all people, whatever their beliefs may be. Thus government does not need to be in the hands of religious people to achieve God's purpose for government, which is peaceful existence in which individuals can serve God and one another. You can read about that in Romans 13. Indeed, Christians should be involved in government but using religious values as a campaign device? Reminds me of the world's oldest profession.

September 8

Our thoughts are drawn this weekend to that most unpleasant memory. We thought it must be a plane off course but then came the news. A second plane, a second tower. What happened was more than could be understood that day. It still is. Although five years have passed, the remembering is still painful. We had to let ourselves believe that people were basically good. Then the buildings were hit,

people jumped to their death, and people just like you and me fled for their lives. There is evil, and evil lives in people.

We asked, "God, where are You?" and we still wonder. He was there. "God sits high but looks low." He looks down in the rubble, down to the sobbing souls. The Most High who came down to the cross is with the victim, with the crushed, with you, with me.

There is so much to understand, but not now. This weekend some quiet remembrance and one continuing hope, "Lord, have mercy upon us."

September 11

We remember...

170 guests and workers were trapped in "Windows on the World," the restaurant on the 106th floor of the north tower of the World Trade Center. Christine Olender, an assistant to the restaurant's general manager, telephoned Port Authority police. The fresh air is going down fast! I'm not exaggerating." "Ma'am, I know you're not exaggerating."

On the 64th floor of the same building, Patrick Hoey was told, "Stay near the stairwells and wait for police to come up." Patrick and those with him waited for an hour and a half. He called again, "The smoke is getting kind of bad. We are contemplating going down the stairwell. Does that make sense?" "Yes. Try to get out," said the police. "All right. Bye," said Mr. Hoey.

There are countless more sad stories. We shall always remember.

"If the foundations are destroyed, what can the righteous do? The Lord tests the righteous, but His soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence. The Lord is righteous; He loves righteous deeds; the upright shall behold His face," (Psalm 11:3, 5, 8).

September 12

Hi! Christian here. I'm now five months old. Gramps asked me to write today's Minute. The old guy is getting complaints he's not as fresh as I am. People are calling him "stale Dale." So I said, "Opa, I will help you out."

The family was at Grandpa and Grandma's house. I must be an Italian baby because everybody in my family is a paparazzi. You know the paparazzi, those people who are always taking your photo. Great grandmas, aunts, Grandma the Blogger: All paparazzi, all snapping me doing this or that. Of course, Mommy is paparazzi number one, always snapping my picture. Some of her pictures are going to be very embarrassing to me in about 20 years, like, "Look at baby Christian in bathtub buff."

Since they use digital cameras, they can snap and snap and snap but then erase and erase and erase. They keep only the best ones of me. Is life going to be like that? Will I be able to erase the bad stuff I do and keep only the good stuff? If I can't, I

better learn how to live the right way. And if I do some bad things, I hope to know Someone who will erase those bad things from His memory.

Opa, I hope this helps you out, helps you all out.

September 13

"The eternal God is your refuge, and underneath are the everlasting arms"
(Deuteronomy 33:27).

The Bible has many passages like that, "refuge" passages, and we quickly focus on the safety promised. But wait! What's the context? Aren't "refuge" passages prompted by a whole lot of real life trouble? "Many are the afflictions of the righteous" (Psalm 34:19). Really, who needs refuge except someone having big time troubles? Hurricanes, accidents, life-threatening diseases, financial disaster.... There are real reasons that drive us to shelter. So when the Bible presents God as a refuge and his "arms" supporting you, it's against the background that you've got troubles and your strength, your resources aren't enough.

Do you pay insurance premiums to guarantee you'll have no problems? Of course not. Realistically you know problems come and insurance helps you deal with them. "He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). Faith in God and trust in Jesus don't exempt us from the attacks of life. What pious habits do...that's so important...pious habits implant in us the directions toward divine shelter when troubles are upon us. "Many are the afflictions of the righteous, but the Lord delivers him out of them all."

Our thoughts, prayers, and help go out to people driven to refuge by the troubles of life.

September 14

Last weekend our daughter Katie became Mrs. Charles Bailey. We'll pray for them, just as we pray for others dear to us. Sometimes those intercessory prayers, prayers for others, are hard. What should I say? Will my prayer be proper and pleasing to God? The minister at the wedding suggested the Lord's Prayer is a helpful way to pray rightly for others. It is, after all, a prayer from Jesus, God's Son, so it should be OK with His Father and ours.

"Our Father," not "my Father." We're all in this together so think of someone beside yourself when you pray. "Our Father who art in heaven." Earthly fathers disappoint us, everyone does. "In heaven" means He's able to do far more than any earthly person we've ever had any experience with.

"Hallowed be Thy Name." God's name is all He's revealed to us about Himself, that He's Triune, Creator, Redeemer, Sanctifier, all that's in the Creed. May the person for whom I pray treasure everything God has revealed about Himself.

"Thy Kingdom come." God must be ruler over all things. Here you pray that God's grace and truth rule in the life of the one for whom you intercede.

It was a new idea for many of us, to use the Our Father as an intercessory prayer. More tomorrow.

September 15

More on praying the Lord's Prayer for others: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." God ultimately gets His way; will you let Him have His way with you? Here you pray your person will say with Jesus, "Not my will but Thine be done."

"Give us this day our daily bread." We pray God give them the necessary physical things for life, home and health, work and sufficient wealth.

"Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us." Not forgiving as God in Jesus has forgiven you invites resentment and bitterness into a relationship.

"Lead us not into temptation." Don't let them give in to sin, but "deliver us from evil." Protect them from harm to body and soul and finally bring them to heaven. Finally "Amen:" a word of confidence God has heard your prayer and will act for that dear one for whom you prayed.

Near the end of the wedding, the minister led the congregation in the Lord's Prayer. First he placed his hands on Charlie and Katie's heads and said that symbolized we were praying for them. I've been critical of this minister over the years, but I think he made some good points about praying for others and I wanted to pass them along to you.

September 18

I assume you had to, had to, take some kind of civics class when you went to school, learning how our government works. In the years since have you (a) increased your knowledge of how government works? (b) forgotten what you had to learn? or (c) grown cynical about government?

Last week Pope Benedict quoted a medieval text that says the teachings of the Prophet Muhammed are "evil and inhuman," especially "his command to spread the faith by the sword." Benedict did not endorse that or reject that; he just cited it. As you know, some Muslims who have no concept of rational discussion reacted violently. Many Muslims did not, knowing how to address issues with words rather than violence, but how many Middle East countries do they dominate?

Writing about the role of higher education, Harold Shapiro admits a nation like ours can "lose its soul and slide into some form of tyranny within an autocratic state" ("A Larger Sense of Purpose," p. 8). That possibility is one reason for today's second annual "Constitution Day," a day not only to thank God for the blessing of the Constitution but also to renew our rusty study of how government really works. For us not to know the Constitution jeopardizes the freedoms of our children and grandchildren. "We the people..."

September 19

Hi, Christian here. I am so happy. I learned how to sit up without being held. You big people do that all the time but it's hard for a baby. I was plopped and I always toppled. Plopped on the couch, I toppled onto the cushion, soft landing. Plopped on the floor, I toppled, hard landing for baby's head. Daddy and Mommy chuckled every time I toppled. "Come on, Christian, stay up." Hey, don't you remember when you were 17 plumpy pounds? The other day I got it! Now I get plopped but don't flop!

I'm so happy that I said, "Opa, can I tell the people what I can do?" "Yup, but don't brag" he said. "The Bible says, 'If you think you are standing firm (or sitting up), be careful that you don't fall'" (1 Corinthians 10:12).

I wonder if big people forget that some things are hard for kids. Do big people forget they had to learn things, like sitting up? Do big people forget they were teenagers and did stupid things? It might be better if they remembered they were kids.

Gotta go. Mommy just plopped me on my stomach for "tummy time." "Come on, Christian, lift your head up. Push up on your arms." Mommy, you just wait 'til Opa and Oma tell me about baby Lizzy!

September 20

A friend of mine got some bad medical news the other day that set me to thinking. So much popular religion, the kind of stuff you see on TV, if you're into that... So much popular religion leaves you with the impression that the Bible is about prosperity and health and happiness. So when you get sick and don't have a miraculous recovery, when your finances belly-up, when your second "Christian" marriage doesn't go any better than the first failed marriage... well, you're just not getting the God thing.

In church Sunday I was reminded I missed "Holy Cross Day," September 14th. St. Paul says, "Jews demand signs and Greeks look for wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Corinthians 1:22-24).

Can you find any extended passages in the Bible that promise prosperity, health and happiness here and now? Page through Matthew, Mark, Luke and John and you'll see the majority of pages present the suffering of Christ, both in His ministry and on the cross. That's what it was about on His mission, to be with us in the sufferings of our lives. He'll be with my friend in her ordeal.

September 21

Cross the Mississippi River at Chester , Illinois , and you see a statue of Popeye the Sailor Man. The cartoon character with big forearms and a pipe in his mouth was based upon a real life river man from this southern Illinois town. You can hear his song, can't you? "I'm strong to the finish 'cause I eats me spinach. I'm Popeye the Sailor Man." With e-coli showing up, I hope Popeye is laying off the spinach these days.

The outbreak should encourage us to an old, often forsaken custom. Do you pray at mealtime...or are you blasé about the blessing? When the Bible says, "Man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord," it's acknowledging that we do need food to live (Deuteronomy 8:3). In fact, gratitude for food is so important that it found a central location in Jesus' succinct, sound byte prayer, "Give us this day our daily bread (Matthew 6:11).

"Feed Thy children, God most holy; Comfort sinners poor and lowly. O Thou Bread of Life from heaven, Bless the food Thou here hast given! As these gifts the body nourish, May our souls in graces flourish Till with saints in heavenly splendor At Thy feast due thanks we render." Now that truly will be "strong to the finish!"

September 22

Happy New Year to our Jewish friends! At sundown Saturday, Rosh HaShanna, begins the Jewish New Year 5764. Rosh HaShanah ushers in ten days of repentance, repentance before God who judges the world. For what should we repent? Sin, of course, but here a comparison of Judaism and Christianity gets interesting. "The concept of 'sin' in Judaism is not quite the same as in Christianity..... Those sins we repent at this time of year are a failure to live up to our potential, a failure of fulfilling one's obligations." (George Robinson, "Essential Judaism," p. 96)

Christianity does indeed take a different approach. For example, "All men...are conceived and born in sin. That is, all men are full of evil lust and inclinations from their mothers' wombs and are unable by nature to have true fear of God and true faith in God. This inborn sickness and hereditary sin is true sin and condemns to the eternal wrath of God all those who are not born again through Baptism and the Holy Spirit." (" Augsburg Confession," II)

A profound difference! And think about this: On the Day of Judgment, your personal opinion won't decide the issue. What God has said will. Take some time to read the Bible this weekend. Psalm 51 or Psalm 130 are good places to start.

September 25

Happy birthday, Caesar Augustus!

Who? The first century B.C. saw civil war throughout the Mediterranean world. Caesar Augustus established himself as emperor and ruled from 27 B.C. until his death in 14 A.D. The historian Tacitus wrote, "When the world was wearied by civil strife, (he) subjected it to empire under the title 'Prince.'" (Annales I.1) His birthday, September 23rd, last Saturday, was celebrated throughout the Mediterranean world with parades, sacrifices for his welfare, dramas, and a general carnival atmosphere. (Calvin Roetzel, "The World that Shaped the New Testament," p. 74)

Augustus, of course, was no Christian, dying when Jesus was just a teen-ager. He was kind toward the Jews throughout his empire, part of his policy of kindness toward all subjugated peoples. Because he put in place the "Pax Romana," the Roman peace, a sect of the Jews, the "Christians," was able to practice their beliefs and grew rapidly in numbers.

God works that way, using world leaders who do not acknowledge Him to serve the people who do. Hence Paul wrote, "I urge...that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone – for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness" (1 Timothy 2:1-3). So, happy birthday, Augustus, wherever you are, and we are reminded to pray for our leaders.

September 26

I suspect many men do this, surf from channel to channel. It's mindless, which is why I know many of us men do it. Surfing past MTV, I wonder what in the world could attract anyone to watch, which means we have a 59-year-old man mindless of the generation gap. One show popular show chronicles plastic surgeries on women.

"I want a famous face.... It really disturbs me that people like the ones on that show exist," writes Roxi Azari in the magazine "Elementz of Life." "And for those of you who don't know, it's MTV following people getting plastic surgery to disguise their insecurities." Ms. Azari goes on to describe the nonsense of the whole thing and then concludes with this: "So to those girls who are saving up cash to take a little bit off here and add a little bit on there, you are beautiful and deserve more than injected plastic to feel it. It's like... we struggled so hard to erase this mind set of being housewives but instead of putting down the kitchen knife we have aimed it at our lives, chopping off body parts left and right, leaving the next generation with only fifty percent of what real humans look like." (p. 18-19)

I'm not alone. Too many people are watching TV mindlessly.

September 27

The parable about the repentant prodigal son, the boy who put his father's house in the rear view mirror and then blew through the old man's money, appeals to our deep yearning for a home where we are safe and accepted. If you had or have a tough situation at home, you know that marriage and family isn't the automatic answer. If you have a "church home," you know that's not heaven either.

Abraham Heschel, the late Professor of Ethics and Mysticism at Jewish Theological Seminary, suggests the home we yearn for. "For the soul, home is where prayer is. In his cottage, even the poorest man may bid defiance to misery and malice. That cottage may be frail, its roof may shake, the wind may blow through it, the storms may enter it, but there is where the soul expects to be understood. Just as the body, so is the soul in need of a home. Everybody must build his own home; everybody must guard the independence and privacy of his prayers. It is the source of security for the integrity of conscience.... At home I have a Father who judges and cares, who has regard for me, and, when I fail and go astray, misses me. I will never give up my home." ("Moral Grandeur and Spiritual Audacity," p. 258f.)

If you've given up your prayer "home," Father welcomes.

September 28

You've probably had the experience of arriving somewhere and then, when you thought about it, you couldn't remember having gone through some intersection or past some landmark. Does that apply to your personal spiritual growth? If you're satisfied with the status quo of your spiritual life, if your church habits are entrenched, your devotional reading the same, your friends only like-minded believers, might you imagine that you are growing spiritually when an outside observer, say God, knows you're deceiving yourself?

"Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like" (James 1:23-24).

On Tuesday Andrew Fastow was sentenced to six years in prison for his part in the Enron fraud and Bernard Ebbers began serving a 25 year prison sentence for his fraud at WorldCom. Will they start to see themselves as they really are? Do you take criticisms and judgments against yourself into a regular time of solitary confinement before God so that you'll better see yourself as you really are, a sinner who can't justify yourself before God, a sinner growing in appreciation of His grace and forgiveness? Or are you on spiritual cruise control?

September 29

No reason for you to know this when you plunged into today's work, but in the calendar of the Christian church today is the day of "St. Michael and All Angels."

The archangel Michael shows up in the biblical books of Daniel (10:13 -21, 12:1), Jude (9), and in Revelation 12:7-9, "There was war in heaven. Michael and his angels fought against the dragon, and the dragon and his angels fought back. But he was not strong enough, and they lost their place in heaven. The great dragon was hurled down – that ancient serpent called the devil or Satan, who leads the whole world astray. He was hurled to the earth, and his angels with him."

While there's much the Bible doesn't tell us about angels, and much it tells is mysterious, it does reveal that God has put the good angels, like Michael, on the detail of protecting us. "He will command His angels concerning you, to guard you in all your ways" (Psalm 91:11). Jesus hints we may truly have guardian angels: "In heaven their angels see the face of My Father" (Matthew 18:10). Angels aren't objects of worship and get only one day of special honor in the church calendar. Good thing God has them on duty more than one day a year for you and me!