

September 2007

September 4

President Bush has an M.B.A. Yesterday he demonstrated MBWA, "Management by Walking Around." By going to Iraq, the President did what he could not have done sitting at his desk in the Oval Office. People will say what they want about the surprise visit, but one thing is obvious: Life is tied to places and times...and people who care go.

It sounds tedious to say we're bound to places and time, but we obviously are. Some religious people avoid the tedium by exalting spiritual qualities but ignoring physical facts.

"God bless you, but I won't bother about your starving body or your crime-infested neighborhood." But God cares and so God goes to people where they are, body and soul. When something was wrong in Paradise, God did MBWA: "The man and his wife heard the sound of the Lord God as He was walking in the garden" (Genesis 3:8). His Son Jesus did the same, walking to where the trouble was. "Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem" (Luke 9:51).

A popular word in contemporary spirituality is "seeker," someone who is seeking after God. That notion puts the person, the "seeker," in control of the relationship with God. Flip the idea around. You're being found in your place and in today's time. God is doing MBWA...and coming to you.

September 5

To my grandson: Hi, Christian! Opa here. Oma and I are glad you came to our house for the Labor Day weekend. We had fun. Oma and I learned two things while you were here. First, we learned that older people don't have the energy to keep up with you toddlers. You are a whirling dervish! Second, after you left, Oma and I listened to the calm and started to put things back in their places. I got out the vacuum to help clean but I didn't know how to start it or how make the upright part lean back. Oma rolled her eyes at me, and then showed me.

Opa, Christian here. I was glad to visit you and Oma. Opa, don't you know the Bible? "To everything there is a season" (Ecclesiastes 3:1). You are in the season of boring calm and clean. "A place for everything and everything in its place!" We toddlers are in the season of strewing things around. That's our work and we do it well. And Opa, you couldn't start the vacuum? Sounds to me like you should learn to help Oma more.

Christian, thank you. "To everything a season." I hope you'll come back soon!

September 6

There were three deaths yesterday. Paul Gillmor, 68, a United States Representative from Ohio died from undisclosed causes. Jennifer Dunn, a former member of the House from Washington, died at age 66 from a blood clot. Dr. D. James Kennedy, Florida minister and leader of the religious right, died at age 76 from cardiac arrest. Three deaths. Actually there were many more, but you were not one of them.

For today's Minute I was going to write about the expected entrance of former Senator Fred Thompson into the race for president. To get into an election race, for that matter to get into many things in life, you have to have ambition. The word "ambition" comes from a Latin word meaning "a going around." During the days of the Roman Republic candidates for office went around, meeting people and seeking votes. As years passed, the going around often included bribery, so by the time of the Roman Empire "ambition" was a bad word. If you were caught for bad ambition, your property was confiscated and you were deported.

Jesus says, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 14:14)

Three deaths and counting. For Jesus' sake, forgive whatever is vain in my own pursuits and purify my personal ambitions.

September 7

About two blocks west or five blocks south. When I grew up, both sets of grandparents were close to home and we visited them all the time. I don't remember when it happened, but sometime this little kid figured out that Grandpa and Grandma actually were the parents of my parents. Those authority figures who told me how to live my life? They were kids too. They reprimand me? Hey, they were reprimanded by their parents. "Don't slam the door when you go out!" I bet they got yelled at for that too. Wow, was that great when it dawned on me that my parents were just grown up kids.

Sunday is "Grandparents Day." We didn't need an artificial day back then. We were at Grandma's and Grandpa's all the time and we truly did show them the greatest of respect. After all, they deserved it. They had to raise our parents! Moral of the story: Young moms and dad, with all your parenting books and parenting tapes, don't be obsessive about perfect parenting. If they haven't already, your kids will soon figure out that you were a kid too.

September 10

Almost twenty years ago I was appointed speaker for the oldest weekly religious radio program, The Lutheran Hour. Back home the pastor announced the appointment to the congregation. His next announcement was the death of a church member. A man hard of hearing confused the two announcements and told his friends that Dale Meyer had died. More than anything else in my life, that incident taught me that I can't control what people think or say about me. What counts most is a clear conscience.

General Petraeus is on Capitol Hill to testify about the surge. Even before he sits down in front of the imposing array of legislators, staffers, cameras and lights, some people are praising him and his report while others are making him out to be a lackey of the administration. The public Petraeus and the private Petraeus: one at the mercy of everyone's opinion, the other known by himself, family, and hopefully a good conscience before God.

"Our conscience testifies that we have conducted ourselves in the world, and especially in our relations with you, in the holiness and sincerity that are from God. We have done so not according to worldly wisdom but according to God's grace." (2 Corinthians 1:12)

You're motivated by many things. Is one motivation to keep your conscience clear?

September 11

From the Minute the day of the attack:

"We dare not be naïve about the world in which we live or the role our trust in God requires us to take. When a congressman asked me how to reconcile Christian love with his service on the House Anti-Terrorism Committee, I answered that it is also sacrificial love when our government and military personnel put themselves into danger and even combat to protect us. God has given the government the right to use force to protect its citizens (Romans 13).

"As individuals we dare not be naïve either. There are evil forces that want to attack the goodness of God in your life, to make you doubt, to shake you from your place of stability and peace. Peter, (the one Jesus called 'Rocky' but whose own behavior was anything but steady), reminds us, 'Be sober, be vigilant, because your adversary the devil prowls about like a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour.'" Therefore, always, but especially today, God help us in our personal individual lives to stand firmly in His love and to not be tossed to-and-fro by the uncertainty of these early moments of terror. And then let us pray for wisdom as Christian citizens, that we might 'resist evil steadfast in the faith' (1 Peter 5)."

September 12

To our Jewish friends we say, "Happy New Year!" Rosh Hashanah begins this evening at sundown. Rosh Hashanah means the "head of the year," and this evening begins the year 5768 according to Jewish reckoning.

"Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom" (Psalm 90:12). That's what observant Jews will pray for this evening. There is a prayer of thanksgiving. "Blessed are You, Adonai our God, Ruler of the Universe, who has given us life, sustained us, and allowed us to reach this day." Unlike the way many Christians keep New Year's Eve on December 31st, an observant Jew approaches this new year with spiritual sobriety. The prayer of Unitaneh Tokef says, "Who shall live and who shall die, who shall see ripe age and shall not, who shall perish by fire and who by water..." (George Robinson, "Essential Judaism," p. 40). "Teach us to number our days," indeed!

Christians believe that the Old Testament points to a Messiah and we believe the Messiah has come in Jesus of Nazareth. But has much contemporary American spirituality turned religion into a super-sized discount store where you pick and choose the elements of faith that best serve you? Those prayers of Judaism remind us to sober up about the seriousness of faith.

September 13

Hi, Christian here! I'm getting big. I sit at the dining room table with Mommy and Daddy. I can pick up my food and eat it. I can pick up my cup and drink. I like throwing things down to the floor. I sit up in my high chair and fling the spoon down to the floor. Clang! I throw food down to the floor. Splat! I point. I say, "Ahhh!" This is a great game. Mommy or Daddy scoop me from my throne, put me down on the floor, and make me pick it up.

Then back up to my chair and I do it again. This is fun! But I'm starting to think that Mommy and Daddy don't see it that way.

Here is my question for you big people. Are there things in your life that you think are fun but your big Father is not amused? Opa loves the hymn, "Just as I am without one plea, but that Thy blood was shed for me." But then Opa says, "Christian, that doesn't mean that God wants you to stay just as you are." Does being a Christian mean you should change?

September 14

A few weeks ago the media worked up a lather about Mother Theresa. "Can you believe she had faith struggles?" was the theme of their... what's the word, ignorant, uninformed, biased...reporting? Whatever word you choose, people who are earnest students of the faith can identify with Mother Theresa's struggles. She once wrote, "If I ever become a saint, I will surely be one of 'darkness...'. If there be no God – there can be no soul. Is there is no soul then, Jesus – You also are not true."

I hope you know that struggle from your own faith thoughts. Why does God seem to play a cosmic hide-and-seek game with us? Have you puzzled about that?

Flannery O'Connor wrote, "I think there is no suffering greater than what is caused by the doubts of those who want to believe. What people don't realize is how much religion costs. They think faith is a big electric blanket, when of course it is the cross. It is much harder to believe than not to believe." (New York Times, September 5; A26)

Today is "Holy Cross Day" in the calendar of the church. The cross is not about getting over your cold or your debts or what have you. The cross IS about the struggles of following Jesus, often against the evidence.

September 17

When I was in grade school, we had a series of workbooks, called, "Think and Do." I don't remember what the workbooks were about but the title stuck with me. Think and do is a good reminder as you plunge into the new work week. Before you plunge into your workday doings, think: God is real and can't renege on His promises to you.

Jesus once told a rich young man to sell all that he had and follow Him (Luke 18:22). About that Oswald Chambers wrote, "Jesus did not go after him, He let him go. Our Lord knows perfectly that when once His word is heard, it will bear fruit sooner or later." Think, remembering God's promises will bear fruit in your life...as long as you trust them when you do whatever it is you do.

Visiting a church last month in Torgau Germany , I was taken by a Latin inscription near the pulpit. No worshipper can see this inscription; only the preacher sees it, and that only when he leaves the pulpit. "In silence and hope will be your strength" (Isaiah 30:15). That is to say, Preacher, think about it. If you've properly spoken the promises of God, be still now and let God work on the people through His promises.

God is real. Think about that, and then go about your daily doings.

September 18

Sunday's New York Times had a photograph of little girls in Nepal . The caption: "Girls took part in a ceremony yesterday in Katmandu , Nepal , in which they were worshiped as goddesses. The girls are believed to embody Taleju, a Hindu goddess who befriended an ancient king. She is said to leave their bodies once they reach puberty." (September 16; A3)

I know nothing about this belief but it's interesting that the caption said the goddess "is said to leave their bodies once they reach puberty." You don't have to be a Christian to know goodness leaves people, you and me included. Many Bible passages say goodness was already gone when we were born (for example, Psalm 51:5). It's called "original sin," and this inherited sinfulness shows up in the actual sins you and I commit every day, not to mention people in Nepal .

How to get goodness back is the challenge. The Bible's answer is the new birth of baptism. "All of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death. Count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Sin shall not be your master." (Romans 6:3, 11, 14)

I googled Taleju and found more than I can read. "Dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus" is enough on goodness for me.

September 19

"Most of us know someone who has made a career of bitterness. The cause of bitterness is a refusal of grace."

That's what Elisabeth Elliot said some years ago, quoted in "The Dallas Morning News." She should know. In 1947 she married Jim and moved with him to Ecuador to be missionaries to the Aucas, a jungle tribe so feared that it was said no one who went to them came out alive. On January 8, 1956, the tribe attacked and killed Jim and four other missionaries.

Here's where grace, God's kindness in Christ, made a difference. Two years later Mrs. Elliot returned to Ecuador and went to live with the tribe. Reporter Berta Delgado wrote, "she learned long ago that you have to recognize your own sins first." "You cannot forgive someone else," Mrs. Elliot said, "until you receive the grace of God to forgive your own sins. Most of us know someone who has made a career of bitterness. The cause of bitterness is a refusal of grace."

Is there any relationship in your life where grace is waiting to make a difference?

September 20

Jesus prayed to His Father that Christians "may be one as we are one" (John 17:11). Sadly, Christians have not been one but have been divided for millennia. Such divisions are not Jesus' will and they weaken our testimony to His truth. But they happen.

Today the bishops of the Episcopal Church begin their semi-annual meeting in New Orleans . The Episcopal Church, part of the worldwide Anglican Communion, is sorely divided over the

blessing of same-sex unions and the consecration of gay bishops. We are saddened when any church is in turmoil. Because unity is God's will... "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity," reads Psalm 133:1...we pray for reconciliation in the Anglican Communion.

If that is to happen, it won't happen overnight. Rev. Ephraim Radner of Wycliffe College in Toronto said of this week's meeting, "I'm not saying it will resolve everything, but it will set in motion responses that have been brewing for a long time" (New York Times, September 16; A21). When Jesus prayed for our unity, He prayed, "Sanctify them by the truth; Your Word is truth" (John 17:17). I'm praying this week's meeting sets out on a process toward unity that will be based on God's Word.

September 21

Robert Putnam was on Concordia's campus Tuesday evening. He delivered the Dellinger Lecture, an annual lecture that has brought names like George Will, Tony Snow, David Gergen, Edwin Meese and others to our campus. Dr. Putnam is a professor at Harvard and delights in statistics, especially statistics about Americans and religion. He told us that about half of Americans are no longer in the denomination in which they were raised, that people tend to pick congregations where they find people like themselves, and that picking a new church is often driven by political preferences. A person who describes himself as a liberal Democrat won't go to a church loaded with conservative Republicans. All that is about people who go to church. Church attendance has been declining for a long time and Dr. Putnam showed us that twenty-somethings are walking away from traditional congregations in big numbers.

All that is very fascinating, especially to an audience of theology professors, pastors, and future pastors and deaconesses. The audience noted that the statistics don't show people picking a church because they are searching to know God as He really is, Creator, Judge, and the only One who can reconcile us sinners to Himself, things clearly taught in the Bible. Instead, people are seeking a god to suit themselves. Anybody think this is really dangerous?

September 24

I went into my seminary class last week, sat down in my chair, and asked the students if any of them had committed adultery lately. You should have seen them look back at me with wide-eyed amazement! "What are you talking about, prof? We're here at the seminary studying to become pastors. Why kind of question is that?" That was exactly the response I anticipated.

"OK, then tell me this. Would you ever commit adultery?" I could see piety taking over (you can see it descend on seminarians) and so a good number of them shook their heads "No, of course we would never do that."

"That's what I expected," I said, and went on to tell them something I learned when I interviewed Jerry White of Navigators. The gist of what he said is this: If you think you'll never commit adultery, you're a good candidate to commit adultery. On the other hand, if you know you could, you're better prepared to ward off the temptation.

Oswald Chambers: "Temptation is not something we may escape, it is essential to the full-orbed life of a man.... What you go through is the common inheritance of the race, not something no one ever went through before. God does not save us from temptations; He succors us in the midst of them." ("My Utmost for His Highest," September 17)

September 25

One reason Jesus Christ is Good News is because He voices what people are thinking. In John 14 he told the disciples, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." Why did He say that? Because He knew they were upset. He had just told them one of them was going to betray Him and that Peter was going to deny Him. Of course they were upset...and Jesus gave voice to their worries.

Next He said, "Trust in God, trust also in Me." Why? The disciples believed in God, just as most Americans believe in God, but they were having doubts that this man from Nazareth was God to them. The teaching that the only way to know God is by following Jesus Christ is offensive, and those old disciples were stumbling over that exclusive claim.

Jesus Christ still surfaces our feelings. His Spirit does that through the Bible, and perhaps in no place better than in the Psalms. We can't always get a handle quickly on the feelings that churn within us but read the Bible long enough and you will. And when that reading identifies your feelings, your fears, your guilt, your anger, your loneliness, and the like, then the Spirit of Christ through the Bible can speak a good, effective Word of forgiveness and hope to you. That is really Good News!

September 26

Wasn't it Rodney King who complained after riots in Los Angeles, "Why can't we all just get along?"

The United Auto Workers have gone on strike against General Motors. Nope, we can't always get along. Truth is, much of life is adversarial. Members of management and labor might like each other, but the relationship has an adversarial nature to it which shows itself in a strike. The court system, the political system, police: adversarial.

Marriage and family certainly ought to be relationships where we all get along, but you know that sometimes people who love each other find themselves at loggerheads. That's not necessarily bad. Better to get a problem out in the open, "negotiate" a solution that suits the family, and then go forward with a hug and a kiss. There is one dynamic that the Christian family has that other adversarial relationships don't. That's the conviction in all hearts that God in Jesus Christ forgives us and therefore we can forgive, negotiate, and get along.

"Come now, and let us reason together, says the Lord. Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool." (Isaiah 1:18). I hope your spats at home are shorter than any strike.

September 27

Speeches and reactions to those speeches have been in the news. On Tuesday Mahmoud Ahmadinejad addressed the United Nations in a speech described as "defiant." Earlier he

spoke at Columbia University . When the president of Columbia introduced him as "a petty and cruel dictator," controversy was kindled. Analyses of the Iranian president's speech included incredulity at his assertion that women are well off in Iran . (New York Times, September 26; C12) When President Bush spoke to the U.N., pundits were surprised that he made only one reference to Iran . Speeches and reactions to speeches.

That gives you a sense of how things were in cities in the first century A.D. Traveling orators gave public speeches to show how good they were and thereby recruit students for the schools they operated. Into that environment came St. Paul , who strove to differentiate his speeches. "My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power, so that your faith might not rest on men's wisdom, but on God's power." (1 Corinthians 2:4-5)

Assuming that the sermon you'll hear Sunday is an obvious presentation of biblical teaching, do you listen and react to the sermon differently than to other speeches? Or do you dissect it and go home for roast, roast the preacher?

September 28

Somewhere the ancient poet Homer wrote, "Injustice, suave, erect, and unconfined; Sweeps the wide earth, and tramples o'er mankind; while prayers to heal her wrongs move slow behind." Too true. Rather than avoiding all troubles that come our way, our prayers seem to "move slow behind."

Superhero Moses asked to see God's glory. Although they were on good terms, God said, "No." He did grant Moses this: "I will cause all My goodness to pass in front of you.... I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy.... But, He said, you cannot see My face, for no one may see Me and live." (Exodus 33:19-20). So God hide Moses in the cleft of a rock, shielded Moses while His glory passed by, and finally did let Moses see His "backside," His goodness and mercy. We best see God's presence in our lives by reflecting on what He has done for us in the past.

God goes ahead of us and answers our prayers with the foresight of a loving heavenly Father, giving us mercies, plural, uncounted acts of loving-kindness. Tomorrow the Church observes "St. Michael and All Angels." The protection of God's angels are mercies of which we are often unaware, but when you think back over your life, don't you see His protective presence through the holy angels?