

HomeTouch

Sunday, April 3, 2011

Scripture Reading: 1 Samuel 16:1-13

THOUGHT: In the cookies of life, friends are the chocolate chips.

I chatted with a young man who'd just enlisted in the Army.

The first week at basic training was rough — primarily because of all the standing around he had to do. It's hard for someone who's eager to serve, eager to save the world to suffer through the discipline of standing around and filling out paperwork. When you have a dream, it's quite difficult to readjust to the notion that whether that dream is realized may not depend on you alone.

So this young fellow was bored. He was like a Ferrari at a red light in a 30 mph zone. What a waste of time, he thought. Nevertheless, he persevered. He told me that he'd been given "fire duty" like most of the others in his platoon. He had to guard the door to keep people out and to keep the newbies in — those green 18-year-olds who might run home to mummy.

For this duty and for his experience throughout basic training he was given a "battle buddy." I'm not sure what the duties of a battle buddy entail in full, but generally, one's battle buddy serves with you when you're bored, when the going gets tough and when you need help just to make it through the night. He's the guy who's got your back. He's the one who protects you. He's the guy you can cry with when you're homesick as allgetout. He's the person who's going to know you better than anyone else.

As he told me this, I thought: "What a wonderful picture of Jesus' relationship with me!" Don't we all need a "battle buddy"? Perhaps we have a friend where we live who is our "battle buddy" — a person who's with us in the trenches, who's fighting the same battles we are, a person who understands us inside out, a person who protects us. That's what friendship is all about.

But if we don't have such a person right now, we *do* have a friend in Jesus, a sort of "battle buddy" — not a bad buddy to have since Jesus has already fought the battle — and won.

—Timothy Merrill

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I praise your name for being by my side so faithfully throughout the years. Stay close by, and keep me close to you. In your name. Amen.

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Sunday, April 10, 2011

Scripture Reading: Ezekiel 37:1-14

THOUGHT: Three things are necessary for the salvation of man: to know what he ought to believe; to know what he ought to desire; and to know what he ought to do. —Thomas Aquinas

In early October of last year, a drama was unfolding in Chile. The world watched as trapped miners were slowly winched up in a small capsule to safety.

By then, the public had been with this story for two and a half months. But the excitement only got better as the first of the miners trapped more than 2,000 feet below ground was lifted from darkness to light, from cold to warmth, from peril to prosperity in a small capsule — a shuttle to salvation. “Welcome to life,” President Sebastian Pinera told Victor Segovia, the fifteenth miner to be rescued.

Now that they live once again in the light, they must walk in the light. For some it was not necessarily easy. Perhaps it was easier than living as a troglodyte, but still, not easy. One came back to face a marriage that was marred. One man, 63, although as tough “as a piece of old leather,” faced health issues. Others will deal with post-traumatic effects. Still others will stumble trying to put their lives back together.

Most miners gave glory to God for keeping them alive and restoring them to their loved ones. Like the Hebrew lads in the fiery furnace, there was another Presence in the midst of their fiery storm. Some miners told of a ghostly butterfly in the mine shaft so unique and shocking the men stopped to watch and by stopping, avoided death when a shower of rocks fell moments later.

The collective community of the human race watched for 70 days the Herculean efforts of technologists, health-care workers, miners, NASA and other experts as they expended their time and energy on only one task: getting the miners up alive. This is the value of life. If a life can be saved, you try to save it.

God so loved the world ... in this case Jesus himself went down into the mine ... and he was the first to leave through a Cross Capsule ... and his ascension, his escape from the jaws of death, is the guarantee of our own.

Thanks be to God!

—Timothy Merrill

Prayer: O God, thank you for sending your Son down to this earth to rescue us! In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Palm Sunday, April 17, 2011

Scripture Reading: Philippians 2:5-11

THOUGHT: Jesus is the God whom we can approach without pride and before whom we can humble ourselves without despair. —Blaise Pascal

Think back over your life to some of the trips you've taken. Remember?

Perhaps it was a vacation to one of our country's beautiful national parks.

I can remember that our family used to leave Chicago on Highway 6 and somehow end up on U.S. Highway 40 out in Nebraska and how we'd motor into Cheyenne, Wyoming, and continue on Highway 40 across southern Wyoming. It was just a two-lane highway then, and Interstate 80 was yet to be laid across the southern part of the state. Then we'd head north and settle down in the Grand Teton National Park, just below Yellowstone. It was a long trip. But worth it.

Perhaps you got on a plane or a boat and took a trip to Europe.

You no doubt have some good memories of those long trips, as I do.

But your longest journey was not nearly as long as the longest journey ever: the journey that Jesus took from before time began into time itself, into humanity. He not only traveled from beyond space and time to take the form of a human being, but as a human being he traveled even farther, to take the form of a servant.

Read our Scripture for today for the apostle Paul's beautiful account of this journey.

Even as a servant, he journeyed farther — to being considered an uncommonly dangerous criminal. And then, the journey came to an end — a temporary end — on the cross.

On this Sunday we remember his journey into Jerusalem. But although the crowds cheered, Jesus knew where this trip was headed. And at Calvary, everyone — everyone — thought the journey was at last over.

We know better.

But for now, we worship, even as someday, according to Paul in our text, every knee will bow, and every tongue confess — that Jesus Christ is Lord.

—Timothy Merrill

Prayer: Lord Jesus, today I worship you as my Lord and Savior, thanking you for taking that long journey to the cross. I do not undervalue the suffering you underwent for the sins of the world. Thank you for facing the cross and gaining the victory. Amen.

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Easter Sunday, April 24, 2011

Scripture Reading: John 20:1-18

THOUGHT: We live and die; Christ died and lived! —John Stott

Waiting for Easter.

Three years ago in 2008 we didn't need to wait for Easter. Celebrated on Sunday, March 23, Easter showed up before the last snows had melted in some parts of the country.

This year, however, we've been waiting. Easter hasn't been this late since it was observed on April 25 in 1943. The last time Easter was celebrated on today's date was 1859!

If you like Easter in late April, you will need to wait until 2038 when it is again observed on April 25. As for April 24, you will need to wait until 2095!

But the good news is that the only true "waiting" for Easter occurred 2,000 years ago when the Bible tells us that even Creation waited for the Son of God to burst the bonds of death!

Since that resurrection morning, believers have not had to wait. All waiting is over! Instead, we rejoice every day of the year that Christ is our risen Lord and Savior.

The songwriter who wrote this hymn was not "waiting" for Easter; he experienced Easter every day. Alfred Ackley wrote:

*I serve a risen Savior, he's in the world today, I know that he is living, whatever men may say.
I see his hand of mercy; I hear his voice of cheer; And just the time I need him, he's always near.*

Chorus: *He lives, he lives, Christ Jesus lives today!*

He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way.

He lives, he lives, salvation to impart! You ask me how I know he lives?

He lives within my heart.

Do you see his "hand of mercy"? Do you "hear his voice of cheer"? If you do, you, too, are not "waiting" for Easter; you are experiencing Easter!

—Timothy Merrill

Prayer: O wonderful God, thank you for your power in rolling back the stone on that morning so long ago. Thank you that today you roll away the stone of unbelief and the stone of doubt, and offer to all the gift of eternal life. In Jesus' name. Amen.

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Sunday, May 1, 2011

Scripture Reading: John 20:19-31

THOUGHT: I don't hate my enemies. After all, I made 'em.

—Red Skelton, comedian, 1913-1997

When Jesus appears to his disciples after his resurrection, they receive the Holy Spirit, who empowers them to go out into the world to proclaim the gospel and to become “peacemakers.”

Making peace. That’s tough. It might involve forgiving someone who has “trespassed against us.” It’s easier to seek revenge, turn our backs, stop speaking, divorce, declare war or simply shut out those who have either hurt or wronged us.

The **Hatfields** and the **McCoys** have been feuding for generations. Yet in 2003, the descendants of both of these clans came together in Pikeville, Kentucky, to sign a symbolic “peace treaty,” and to officially bury their differences. Their gathering made headlines because of who they were and what they did. From childhood, these descendants had listened to and learned the stories of the famous feud. They could’ve carried the bloodletting into the next generation, but they chose not to. Instead of seeking revenge, they sought an “official peace.” They recognized that what their families had done in the past was foolish and that lives had been lost because of it.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus tells us that peacemakers are blessed and are called children of God. Much like he did with the first disciples, he gives us strength through the Holy Spirit to help bring about peace. The Scripture doesn’t say that being a peacemaker is easy. In fact, peacemakers are often persecuted for trying to bring about harmony and reconciliation. But still they persist in their work. In a world that is quick to pull the trigger, more peacemakers are needed.

That said, perhaps you’re a “Hatfield” needing to forgive a “McCoy” or vice versa. Or, perhaps you have neighbors down the hall or across the street who can’t seem to forgive and forget. Perhaps you might have a loving, peacemaking word for them today.

—Sharon Fields

Prayer: Father, take the old, hateful thoughts that we harbor against one another out of our hearts and heal us with your love and mercy. Forgive us our sins, as we forgive those who have sinned against us. Amen.

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Sunday, May 8, 2011

Scripture Reading: Luke 24:13-35

THOUGHT: *One joy scatters a hundred griefs.* —Chinese proverb

We will call her Dorothy Granger.

If you were to meet Dorothy for the very first time, it would be immediately evident that Dorothy has some serious physical health issues. Although a fairly young woman, she has difficulty walking and has to depend on a cane to get around and sometimes friends and family need to help. Every step she takes, registers pain and sympathy from those who see her. But Dorothy's physical problems don't stop her. She never appears depressed or angry. A smile is always on her face.

Dorothy is a singer and she's often asked by local congregations and civic groups to come to their gatherings and perform. Those who gather to hear her notice right away that once she begins to sing, *she is transformed and becomes a new creature!* Expressions of joy, delight and exuberance register throughout her performance. She leaves her audiences speechless and caught up in the moment. The community considers her a gift.

She doesn't take any credit for what happens when she performs. She says that God's presence takes hold of her and gives her the power to do what she does. She considers her talent a blessing that is to be shared with others. Her songs of joy are not just for her audiences, but also for herself.

Can we all be like Dorothy? Like her, can we, too, be willing to look beyond our own aches and pains and shortcomings to share our gifts and blessings with others?

Each of us is a gift from God, endowed with God's spirit to help make the world a better place in some way or another. We may not be able to do the things we once did, or have the resources we once had, but still we are blessed to do something — *something* — that brings joy to others. We just need to figure out what that *something* is!

—Sharon Fields

Prayer: Lord, may the talents and gifts you have given me be enriched by your spirit, so that I may, with joy, share them with others.

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Sunday, May 15, 2011

Scripture Reading: Psalm 23

***THOUGHT: Laughter is brightest where food is best.* —Irish proverb**

Did you know that today is “Chocolate Chip Cookie Day”?

According to a new and unusual cookbook, entitled, *Food Fest 365!*, each day of the year is given a specific recipe of its own. Sometimes the day celebrates a national or international holiday, but most often not. The cookbook is described as a “fun food book.” Items in it range from snacks, desserts, meat dishes, vegetables, cocktails, etc., truly reflecting our American immigrant heritage with each item. The book offers “the kind of recipes that the whole family can enjoy (preparing and eating together).”

People love to eat. We enjoy gathering for a favorite dish or meal. Just look at the history of our religious communities with all of the potlucks and picnics. Or think of high school or college kids and how they love to gather in a dorm room or a family room and devour a few pizzas. Millions of people go to the movies. What do they eat? Most of them get a bag of popcorn. It’s what you do at movies! Or, think of the times you’ve watched some little kids eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwiches or a piece of birthday cake and ice cream.

No doubt you have “food” stories you can tell that might involve a special family gathering or a recipe everyone wanted you to share with them.

Hospitality and food are magical in developing relationships.

Jesus and the early disciples knew the importance of “hospitality and sharing a meal” with friends, new converts and even outcasts. Those in authority often criticized him because he ate with “sinners. They accused him of being a glutton and a drunkard. But he shared meals with others all the time.

It’s quite possible you share a meal with someone every day. You go down to the dining room and sit with the same people day after day. But, without realizing it, you probably have made your closest connections with those with whom you share a meal.

So, today, when a staff member stops by to give you medicine, or make your bed; or if a neighbor stops by to fix the gutters for you; or if a friend drops in to visit, you might have a chocolate chip cookie ready to give him or her. It will be a sign of your joy and love.

—Sharon Fields

Prayer: Lord, help me to be more hospitable and open to those around me.

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Sunday, May 22, 2011

Scripture Reading: John 14:1-14

***THOUGHT: Sun of my soul! Thou Savior dear,
it is not night if thou be near.*** —John Keble

One of the first things I look for when I visit a building with which I'm not familiar is "direction signs." In the malls, conveniently located "stations" near entrances offer a floor plan that begins with the words, "You Are Here," marked by a big red "X," or some other marker. The diagrams indicate your location in relation to the stores you need to get to.

In every public facility, whether it's a church, a library, a hospital or a mall, signs are plastered on walls, doors, inside elevators and in hallways to help us get from "Point A to Point B." Most of the time, if we follow the signs correctly, we are able to get where we need to go without much difficulty. *Most of the time.* And if the signs don't help, we can always ask someone for help. So —

- If someone were to ask for directions on how to become a Christian, what would you say?
- If someone were to ask for directions on how to have joy, what would you say?
- If someone were to ask for directions on how to have peace, what would you say?
- If someone were to ask for directions on how to be more loving, what would you say?

Would you point them toward the Bible? If so, what version? Would you direct them to a church? Which one? A minister? Again, which one?

Or could the person inquiring, simply look at your life as a starting point?

Too often, we forget that as followers of Christ, our lives are to help "point the way" to God. Henri Nouwen once told of an encounter with a former student who said, "When I look at you it is as if I am in the presence of Christ."

Nouwen only remembers saying, "It is the Christ in you who recognizes the Christ in me."

Do our lives reflect Christ and point to God?

—Sharon Fields

Prayer: Lord, I know that I'm not perfect and that I am weak in so many areas. But I pray that throughout my life's journey, the love of Christ is reflected in me.

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Sunday, May 29, 2011

Scripture Reading: Acts 17:22-31

THOUGHT: Fight truth decay — study the Bible daily. —Unknown

A certain church began a women's Bible study to which all were invited regardless of race, denomination or creed. The planners were a little nervous about the study. They simply didn't know if anyone would come.

- They fidgeted over the curriculum a little too much.
- They worried about classroom space.
- Was the time for the study going to work?
- Should they require that a specific version of the Bible be used during the study?
- Did they need to prepare refreshments and if so, how much?
- Did they advertise enough?

The church had the typical "jitters" about starting something new.

When the first day of the study began, the church was delightfully surprised that although the number in attendance was small, women came from various churches throughout the county and adjoining counties as well.

During the study time, old friendships were renewed and new ones established. Denomination lines faded. The attraction was not the curriculum, the classroom size, the time or the food. The women attended the Bible study because they wanted to study more deeply the Word of God and discover what the Lord had in store for them through the Bible study and fellowship time. The group was serious about studying the Word of God. The time was not a social hour for them!

We are blessed to have so many different ways we can seek the Lord: through Bible studies, devotional materials, video programs, nature experiences, plays, musical recordings, fiction and non-fiction, mission trips, worship, conversations with other Christians and a dozen other ways.

Opportunities also exist for us to know and experience the Lord. But we must seek them. As the proverb says, "God gives food to the birds, but does not drop it into their nests." So, too, our "food" awaits us, but we must actively seek to feed on God's word in order to be fed.

—Sharon Fields

Prayer: Open my eyes, my ears, my heart, so that I may always be aware of your presence in my life.

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Sunday, June 5, 2011

Scripture Reading: Acts 1:6-14

***THOUGHT: Prayer is the key to heaven,
but faith unlocks the door.*** —Unknown

Need to study prayer? Go to the public library.

In our local library, one can find at least half a dozen or more books about prayer. They give the *who*, *what*, *when*, *how* and *where* of praying. Many are written in the “everything you always wanted to know about prayer” format. They include chapters on both *personal* and *public* prayer. Some of the material is in story and testimony format, while others use a step-by-step method or poetry to get their message across. Some talk of prayer shawls and prayer rugs, along with prayer closets and secret places. Some recommend that we simply follow the ancient practices that early Christians followed, explaining in detail what those practices were.

Out of curiosity, I’ve seriously looked at many of those materials. They are attractive books with beautiful covers, and some of the authors are well-known pastors and evangelists. The books are helpful guides and the public checks them out regularly.

But I must admit, that even after *reading* about prayer and *hearing* others pray, and having others pray for me, a time comes when I must, as the television commercial suggests, “just do it.”

Prayer doesn’t have to be long and drawn out. Nor do we have to have a “rich vocabulary.” A simple, “thank you,” or “help me, Lord,” or the singing of a hymn can be enough. At times, no words are needed at all. God knows our hearts and hears the public prayers of our lips, the silent prayers of our thoughts, our tearful prayers and sighs of relief. God hears our prayers.

—Sharon Fields

Prayer: Lord, I confess that I don’t pray as often as I should, and it seems that I pray to you most often when I’m in trouble or when I want something from you. Forgive me for my poor prayer habits. You know my heart, Lord. Help me to pray better and more often. Amen.

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Pentecost Sunday, June 12, 2011

Scripture Reading: Acts 2:1-21

THOUGHT: Every time we say, “I believe in the Holy Spirit,” we mean that we believe that there is a living God able and willing to enter human personality and change it.

—J.B. Phillips

Take a look around the room or rooms you live in. What do you see in the room that requires a battery for it to function properly?

Perhaps you have a wall clock or an alarm clock that uses batteries.

Do you have a camera? It probably uses batteries.

How about the remote control for the television? It has a battery.

Still driving a car? It, of course, has a battery.

Now, imagine these items with the batteries removed. Suddenly the clock cannot tell time. The camera cannot take a picture. The remote control will not turn on the television and switch to the channels you desire. And the car will not start and will not take you anywhere.

The clock is just a piece of plastic and aluminum. The camera is just plastic and glass. The remote control is a small rectangular piece of plastic, wires and buttons. And the car is just some metal that’s been fashioned into the shape of a car.

Without batteries, all of these things are quite worthless and useless.

Of course, all one needs to do is pop a AAA battery into the wall clock, camera or remote control, and voila! They’re working again.

The car battery might need to be recharged.

This is Pentecost Sunday. Do you see where I am going with this?

It is the Holy Spirit who gives us daily power for all our needs. It is the energy and power of the Spirit that enables you to do the impossible — whether the “impossible” is to love your neighbor, forgive a wrong, help a friend or have peace of heart.

That’s why spending time each day in prayer and Bible reading is so important. Think of that time as time in which you’re putting in your batteries; you’re reconnecting with the Spirit; you’re recharging for the needs of the day.

—Timothy Merrill

Prayer: Heavenly Father, thank you for sending your Spirit to be with us, teaching and encouraging us, and giving us power for life. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

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Sunday, June 19, 2011

Scripture Reading: Matthew 28:16-20

THOUGHT: We all have our time machines. Some take us back, they're called memories. Some take us forward, they're called dreams.
—Jeremy Irons

Last fall, CNN, the television and Internet news source, enlisted the help of Karen Irvine, curator at the Museum of Contemporary Photography at Columbia College, Chicago, to choose the world's most highly regarded photographs and photographers since 1900. Irvine produced a list of 20 photographs, and CNN asked people on their Web site to vote for their favorites.

The photographers included Alfred Stieglitz, Richard Avedon, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Dorothea Lange and others.

Frankly, I didn't recognize many of the photographs that Irvine selected. So, they weren't very iconic for me.

But it got me to thinking: If I had to choose 20 photographs of events or people of my life, what 20 would I choose? Which 20 would *you* choose?

I'd probably include a photo of my son when he was five years old wearing an oversized football helmet. I'd want a photo or two of my parents. Photographs of my wedding day. Pics of us on our honeymoon. Photos of the children. Photos of our trip to Europe. Perhaps a photo or two of close friends.

What photos would you choose?

The great thing about photos is that they help us to remember! If you took one of your 20 photos and showed it to a friend, you could tell him or her the story behind that photo. The event would come to life.

"Remembering" is an important part of life, even our spiritual life. The Bible speaks of "remembering" quite often. Usually, we're asked to remember the blessings that God has brought our way.

How sad it is when we forget God's goodness. Indeed, the psalmist specifically warns us: "Bless the LORD, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits —" (Psalm 103:2).

—Timothy Merrill

Prayer: O God, photographs could not do justice to the joy you bring to my life. Your goodness and mercy have followed me through the years and will stay with me always. Thank you for your loving kindness. In Jesus' name. Amen.

HomeTouch

Sunday, June 26, 2011

Scripture Reading: Genesis 22:1-14

THOUGHT: Patience makes lighter what sorrow may not heal. —Horace

It's bizarre. I'm talking about the Sagrada Familia Church in Barcelona, Spain. From a distance, the four main towers of the church look like giant drip sandcastles on the beach. But, as you get closer, you discover that these intricate towers are psychedelic, spindle-shaped, mind-bending masterpieces.

The architect? Antoni Gaudi, born in 1852. Some love his work, some hate it. But everyone agrees that Gaudi is gaudy — showy and ornamental, full of geometric shapes and images plucked from nature.

Yet Gaudi's church is still incomplete after 125 backbreaking years. When the cornerstone was put in place, Chester A. Arthur was president of the United States and Queen Victoria was the monarch of England. For all that time, Sagrada Familia has been wrapped in scaffolding and cranes, and the work has inched along, except for the interruption of the Spanish Civil War in 1936.

Finally — yes, finally — the interior has been finished. For the first time in its history, the church hosted a service of worship last September Gaudi would certainly have enjoyed.

But Gaudi — who never believed the cathedral would be finished in his lifetime — was quite unconcerned about how long it would take to complete this magnificent, if gaudy, cathedral. He reportedly once said, “The Master of this work is in no great hurry.”

In making a statement like this Gaudi was suggesting that we live in hope and by faith like those mentioned in Hebrews 11: “All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them” (v. 13).

We don't think like God; our ways are not God's ways; and our time is not God's time. “Hurry” and “wait” are not words in the divine vocabulary although they both are problematic for mere mortals like ourselves.

We must let the Master do his work and to do it in his time — even if it doesn't fit into our timetable.

—Timothy Merrill with Henry Brinton

Prayer: O God, I put my trust in you. I know that perhaps the prayers I pray will not bear fruit in the time frame I have in mind. I must surrender to your timetable and believe that, in your time, your plan will be accomplished. In Jesus' name. Amen.