

LIVE DANGEROUSLY!

Musings on the Christian Ministry

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During a visit to Denver, Colorado, in October 1996, I came across an Eric Hoffer book that I had not read before. The genesis of that work, entitled Before the Sabbath, intrigued me. Having reached the age of seventy-two (my own age when I read the book), Hoffer began to wonder whether his writing skills were still as sharp as ever or whether age might have diminished his ability for clear and concise expression. So, he resolved to maintain, over a six-month period, a daily diary of reflections on a variety of subjects.

The notion of writing a series of meditations without worrying about a footnote apparatus appealed to me. I was still pondering the idea when the next month - a few days before Thanksgiving - my oncologist informed me that laboratory tests had confirmed his suspicion that my prostate cancer, treated six years earlier with radiation, had recurred. With surgery and a period of recuperation ahead of me, my mind became ever more focused on matters I cared about and the idea of putting some thoughts on paper.

The following Pensées, written between Thanksgiving Day and Easter, are the result of this six-month exercise. Since then I have shared these reflections with a small circle of relatives and friends, a few associates in the ecumenical/interfaith network I am privileged to be part of, and with an occasional spiritual pilgrim I have encountered along life 's journey.

To some who have known me over the years this collection of musings may have the flavor of some of the "rambling with Rottenberg" sessions they have been exposed to from time to time. Hopefully, the reader will find some helpful insights in these reflections and perhaps also a bit of humor to lighten up his or her own journey's path.

I.C.R.

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SERVANT OF THE WORD

High Bridge, New Jersey, June 19, 1955. I hold in my hand the printed program of my ordination as a minister of the Word of God. On that day I was invested with authority to preach the gospel message. Thus I joined the ranks of all those who since ancient days have felt called to be proclaimers of the God of the Bible. Or, as the apostle Paul put it, I joined the company of the “servants of Christ, and stewards of God’s mysteries.” (I Corinthians 4:1)

In the not so distant past, many pastors would proudly advertise their special status by placing the initials V.D.M. behind their names: *Verbi Domini Minister*—servant of the Word of the Lord. It is a sacred office; a holy task.

Yet, it seems such a strange idea. Are we really stewards (“managers”) of the affairs of the Holy One, the One who is Wholly Other? If the mysteries are truly the mysteries of *God*, how then are we supposed to “handle” them? We are not! “Handling” (or manipulating) the realm of the mysterious is the job of the holy man of magic. Nor are we called to solve the mysteries. The Bible is not a book of riddles.

Our task is to proclaim the biblical message concerning the ways in which the mysteries have been *revealed* without ever ceasing to be mysteries. We preach the *magnalia Dei*, the great and wonderful deeds of the God of revelation, the One who acts in history and is redemptively present in our midst.

For those of us who are Christian ministers, the supreme mystery is Jesus: Immanuel, God with us. “God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of the mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. It is he whom we proclaim...” (Colossians. 1:27-28; 2:2). We proclaim him as the source of grace, the supreme revelation of divine love. Hence, a true steward of God’s mysteries can also be called a steward of divine grace (Ephesians. 3:2ff.).

Every sermon now becomes a wonderful challenge. How can I convey the exciting stories, which together constitute THE story of the Bible, as a message full of meaning for people’s daily lives? How can I understand and interpret a particular text in its biblical context and translate it into the context of the contemporary world?

None of us is up to it. Every sermon becomes a daring venture of faith. In the final analysis it isn’t up to us whether a sermon becomes an instrument of the Holy Spirit to touch other people’s lives. The very thought that it could happen, however, ought to make us work as hard as we can. The moment the sermon is treated like just another talk, we’re in trouble and so is the congregation.

Most young pastors all too soon experience the pressures of the multitude of ways in

which parishioners expect them to serve the church. The New Testament speaks of a variety of ministries to be performed by people who are differently gifted: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, administrators. The modern pastor's job description tends to put them all in one neat package. The challenge to remain a servant of the Word and a steward of the mysteries of God thus becomes a constant struggle. Pity the pastor who surrenders and stops trying.

Finally, I realize that for my friends in the Catholic-sacramental traditions this all may sound overly one-sided. What about the central priestly task of the clergy—the celebration of the Holy Eucharist? They have a point. On both sides of the Catholic-Protestant frontline we have gone astray. We Protestants have tended to make the sermon so central that we often neglected the mystery of the sacrament—"the visible Word" (Augustine). Our friends in the Catholic and Orthodox traditions on the other hand, while maintaining a deep and rich sense of mystery, have often underestimated the power of the Word as it is carried by the Holy Spirit into the hearts of people and affects the destiny of nations.

Thank the Lord that in these latter days both sides seem to be increasingly open to learn from each other.

II

THE DOCTORING OF THE CLERGY

Question: Where have all the V.D.M.s gone? Answer: Quite a few of them have been turned into D.D.s—*Doctores Divinitatis!* This strikes me as a somewhat strange, even sad phenomenon. It is a peculiarly Protestant pathology. In 1982 Father Theodore M. Hesburgh beat President Herbert Hoover in the Guinness Book of Records race. In that year he received his 90th honorary degree over Hoover's 89. Since then he has passed the one hundred mark, but nobody addresses him as doctor Hesburgh. Of course, when it comes to the upper hierarchical echelons, Catholics have a way with titles too, even though it is hard to imagine anyone addressing Jesus as "Your Excellency."

Whence this hunger for honorary degrees? Very early in my ministerial career I read an article in *Harper's Magazine* about the tricks people will pull off in order to gain the honor for themselves or for their favored person. I showed the piece to my Quaker friend, Dean Freyday, who presented me with a copy of *Barclay's Apology in Modern English*, which he had just edited. This 17th century divine discusses the topic under the section on "vain and empty customs." For him the issue was quite simple: "It is not Doctor Peter and Doctor Paul; just Peter and Paul."

It seems to me that clerical honorary doctorates are among the most inflated commodities in the world today. Inflated not in price, because they can be had for a very modest amount of money and a minimum of work, but inflated in terms of importance attached to them. *USA Today* features an ad: "Ph.Ds—\$149.⁰⁰." An 800 number is added for quick service. So now even the Ph.D. degree is being shamelessly devalued. Yet, clergy wear their three stripes as proudly as if they were newly promoted sergeants of the cross.

Some years ago I wrote a short article with the same title as appears above these reflections. It turned out to be one of the most difficult pieces to get accepted for publication. The neo-conservative journal *Christianity Today*, the more liberal *Christian Century*, the radical *Sojourners*, and *The Other Side*, all periodicals for which I had written before were among the magazines that said, "No, thank you." Did my article lack style or was I perhaps chasing after a sacred cow?

I am well aware that I am opening myself up to the charge of sour grapes, because, if truth be told, no one has ever tempted me with an honorary degree. This may come as a surprise to my mailman, because after my first book was published in 1964, more and more of my correspondence arrived "doctored" and after I joined the denominational bureaucracy there was no stopping the onrush. We are doctoring each other to death.

Some years ago I saw a cartoon. A man with a somewhat apprehensive look in his eyes approaches a door that is marked as follows:

PASTOR
William S. Smith III
B.A., Th.D., M.Div.
Ph.D., D.D., D.Lit,
and your
HUMBLE SERVANT.

I do not wish to sound hyper serious about the subject. Humor with a little sting to it is probably the best response. As the syllogism goes: People are funny. Pastors are people. Therefore, pastors are funny. We have our little quirks, but on heaven's candid camera we are viewed in the image of Christ the Lord who loves us. It is *agape* love in its purest form: "Love in spite of." To him be all glory and honor for ever and ever. Amen.

III

PROF TALK/PLAIN TALK

My friend and fellow seminarian Lambert Ponstein and I loved to discuss theology. We were both older students. He had had more life experience as someone who had been in business. I had had more book exposure, especially to the works of Karl Barth, the great theologian who had never mastered the art of writing a short sentence. Theological terminology was very dear to me, essential—I felt—to express the faith in its real depth. Bert used to argue for simple language and plain talk, especially in sermons.

I remember feeling a certain pride during my early years of ministry when a parishioner would shake my hand after the service and say: “That was really a profound sermon.” Eventually I caught on to the fact that those people were really saying: “I have no idea what you were talking about and I don’t think you did either.”

The story is told that, after then presidential candidate Adlai Stevenson had given a speech on the economy, a lady came up to him gushing that he had delivered “a perfectly superfluous speech.” “In that case,” replied Stevenson, “perhaps I should have it published posthumously.” “Oh yes,” said the lady,” and the sooner the better.”

I have come to recognize that one of the dangers of a seminary education is that some of us come out of it addicted to Prof Talk. Students may have entered with a considerable ability to tell a good story, but now that they have been introduced to scholarship, they have been seduced by the lecture method of communication.

In academia, the cult of abstraction and obscurity often reigns supreme. In pursuit of dignity, many professors produce dreariness. Even nonsense may be accepted as profundity, as happened when Dr. Alan D. Sokal submitted a parody piece saying much about nothing to *Social Text*, a prestigious scientific journal. They published it, because its very incomprehensibility was taken as a sign that the article must be a specimen of sterling scholarship.

The novelist, on the other hand, struggles with language in order to squeeze out the abstractions and make ideas come alive for the reader. Clarity, conciseness and economy of words are the keys to good writing. And also to sound preaching. It is like the great skaters, who make it all look so easy. The blood, sweat, and tears have gone into the preparation, but become hidden in a good performance.

As preachers we have a story to tell to our neighbors and to the nations. Aurelio, the bishop of Valenta, says in Morris West’s novel *The Devil’s Advocate*: “We have a language of our own—a hieratic language if you like... .We talk to the people every Sunday, but our words

do not reach them, because we have forgotten our mother tongue.” The Bible has a language of its own. It is our calling as pastors to translate that language into the language of the people out of a deep desire to reach the hearts of our hearers and satisfy the hunger of their souls.

Frederick Buechner, fiction writer and spiritual guide to many people, was invited to present the Beecher lecture at Yale. Afterward, as the learned dignitaries were taking off their robes, one Yale Divinity School professor asked a colleague: “What did he say?” “He didn’t say very much”, came the reply. “I thought to myself,” ‘writes Buechner, “there was some truth to that, in that my talk hadn’t been much like a lecture” (*Christian Century*, October 14, 1992, p. 901).

The Bible, a book of passion, poetry, prophecy, story and vision, can—amazingly enough—be lectured into a boring book. In that case our listeners will not likely catch the excitement of the good news message it contains. The answer to uninspiring sermons is not less scholarship or intellectual content. Those qualities are badly needed in increased measure. In the final analysis the answer lies, as our charismatic brothers and sisters would say, in the Spirit’s anointing. But somehow the Holy Spirit seems to hook up best with those who work hard to make the story of Christ come alive.

IV

PEOPLE OF THE BOOK

I am glancing through files and files of notes on books I have read. They represent numerous delightful, although sometimes plodding hours of reading. As I reflect on the joys of reading, I think with sadness about all those grade school children who, according to reports, are failing standardized tests. Unless the problem is corrected those children are destined to grow up as severely disadvantaged adults.

I also think about the many pastors who tell me that they are really too busy to read scholarly works. Serious study ceased almost immediately after they moved from the seminary campus to the parsonage. After prayer time, regular seasons of study and reflection seem to me most essential for ministry. These are sacred moments. St. Augustine reports how he eagerly wished to speak to St. Ambrose about pressing matters of faith, but withdrew quietly when he saw him alone in his cell reading.

Let me confess that I had a bookish childhood. Sports were never mentioned in our home. My father, the only son of a Polish Hasidic rabbi, had been raised to believe that study was his primary calling in life. Hence, in our household the responsibility of raising the six children fell almost entirely on the shoulders of my mother. My father's study was like space set apart for a very special activity, to be entered with caution and respect. I don't mention all this as a lesson in sound pedagogy, but to indicate that a love for books was part of the atmosphere in which I grew up.

Muslim tradition refers to Jews and Christians as "people of the Book." It is in the Bible that we find the source of our identity as a people, as a community of faith. Spiritual leadership in Judaism and Christianity is entrusted to those who have studied the sacred texts.

"O give me that book!" wrote John Wesley, "at any price give me the book of God! Let me be a man of one book." I find that a touching statement, and I hope that I'd choose that book if only one book was allowed in my possession. But in general, I would not wish to abandon Karl Barth's advice that one should prepare for preaching with the Bible in one hand and the daily newspaper in the other. Of course, a good commentary is not to be excluded, nor the occasional reading of "secular" literature.

What would we do without the words and witness of the faithful sages who have gone before? How impoverished we would be without the writings of poets and novelists, philosophers and searchers who give us insights into our inner selves and the world around us.

We need all the help we can get if we are to relate the Word to the world. I do not mean to suggest, however, that a pastor should be a person of many books. It is not so much a matter of how much we read, but how well we read. In his diary *Journal of a Soul*, Pope John XXIII of blessed memory mentions how his learned professor of church history had given him excellent

advice! “Read little; little but well.” So many pastors seem to be lacking a basic theological perspective from which they conduct their ministry, because they have never been disciplined enough to delve deeply into the tradition, then digest what they read and decide what they will or will not make their own.

Can books become an escape—a substitute for life? Certainly! Thomas à Kempis warned us in his *De Imitatione Christi* that “When the Day of Judgment comes, we shall not be asked what we have read, but what we have done; not how well we have spoken, but how religiously we have lived.” Or, in the words of the gospel:

“Then the king will say to those on his right hand, ‘Come, you that are blessed by my Father, inherit the Kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food—I was in prison and you visited me.’” (Matthew 25:31ff.).

Still, as we are marching to Zion in the full hope of inheriting the Kingdom, books—like good friends—can surely be of help to us in staying the course.

V.

CLERGY TRAINING

The Reformed Church in America, the denomination to which I belong, is engaged in an animated debate on how to better prepare people for pastoral ministry. First, as the reader might have guessed, a committee was appointed “The Task Force on Standards for the Preparation for the Professional Ministry.” The word “professional” was apparently preferred over the term “pastoral.”

The committee did what committees usually do: issue a report. This rather lengthy document contains several laundry lists of desirable qualifications. In reading it over one gets the feeling that every committee member got his or her favored phrase included. The future professional must be “committed to lifelong learning—while joyfully interacting with people.” Jovial, smiling, outgoing, scholarly types are preferred! At the same time, they must be “competent preachers, worship leaders and interpreters of the church’s theological tradition.” And, oh yes, not to be forgotten is the fact that they should “offer leadership in the transformation of human society into the pattern of God’s will and purpose.” These examples give an indication of the high goals the committee has set. In order to achieve them new levels of bureaucratic structure are proposed. Is that really the answer?

I don’t want to be overly critical. How indeed shall we train our pastors? In 1969 I was offered the deanship of my *alma mater*. If I had accepted, would I have done a better job than my colleagues have done? I’m not so sure.

The late Walter Bentley, who came to the Anglican priesthood via the theater, thought that actors were particularly well suited to counter the pulpit bores among the clergy, and over the years he actually recruited twenty-five candidates from those circles. One of his more celebrated utterances went as follows: “It is said that it took the Egyptians 30 years to make a good mummy, but now the theological seminary can make one in three.” Ah yes, who hasn’t observed that knowing smile on people’s faces when a speaker stumbles over the word “seminary” and it comes out as “cemetery.”

Seminaries, in a desperate effort to keep up with what are assumed to be the demands of the times, are increasingly offering a smorgasbord-type education. While today’s science departments tend to teach more and more about less and less, theological schools seem to do the reverse. Curriculum issues cannot be ignored, nor can the academic achievements of the professors. But pastoral formation needs an extra dimension that is hard to define. It has to do with the blending of scholarship and spirituality, the balancing of theory and practice. I felt sad when my beloved Old Testament professor died, and sadder yet when his successor turned out to be not only a mediocre scholar, but a person who bragged about the fact that he had never administered the sacrament of holy baptism. Can a textual technician, who basically looks upon parish works as the pits really inspire students to preach from the book of Genesis, or Isaiah, or the Psalms with a sense of urgency and enthusiasm?

I shall never forget spending some weeks at the Delta ministry in Mississippi during the tumultuous 1970s. Every morning we would gather with Clarence Jordan of the Koinonia Farm in Americus, Georgia, under a huge tree for an hour of Bible study. What memorable moments those were! How those relatively brief contacts influenced my ministry in the years that followed! I realize that there never will be enough Clarence Jordans to go around. Furthermore, we cannot lay the whole burden at the seminary steps. The simple truth is that it has become increasingly difficult for seminaries to provide pastoral training in the context of a genuine community of faith, worship and mutual support. The very fact that an ever larger number of students are second career people who hold full time jobs and commute to “attend classes,” mitigates against a preparation that combines formal education with spiritual formation. Unfortunately such factors will only reinforce the individualistic entrepreneurial spirit which is so predominant in society at large with “success” as the major standard by which to measure performance.

How to compensate for such educational gaps in later years when many pastors end up feeling lonely in their daily struggles? During a recent meeting with clergy one participant stated that he felt the need for a “safe house” where he could meet others in an environment of mutual acceptance and support. There is such a thing as the Association for Battered Clergy with its tongue-in-cheek paper *The Parish Chute*. I am not sure that any services this organization might provide are the answer to the crisis we face, but I do hope that their penchant for humor will at least provide an antidote to the danger of fostering a martyr complex.

Christian faith and ministry are nurtured in an environment of *koinonia*, reconciliation and healing love. Too many ministerial candidates have not experienced that, and our challenge is to expose them to these central realities of what it means to be the Church of Jesus Christ. Denominational mailings offering expert advice are not enough, nor do roaming emissaries with an expense account who stop in once or twice a year at the parsonage really fill the void.

A “safe house?” It may sound crazy, but I could envision centers where students, professors, pastors, and other spiritual sojourners experience saving grace by sharing prayers, thoughts, music, silence, and perhaps an occasional movie. Seminaries would do worse than establishing a place of *koinonia* in Christ right there on the campus, a place where students become “professionalized,” professors become humanized, and all together grow in the knowledge of the love of Christ. In short, a place where people learn the meaning of servanthood (*diakonia*).

VI

THE PASTOR AS LISTENER

Church members often refer to their pastor as “our preacher.” If one is looking for a “listener,” so conventional wisdom goes, a therapist is the professional to see. Of course, a cheaper way is to go to A.A. or one of the ever increasing numbers of self-help groups.

Preaching is indeed a priority item on the agenda of a Minister of the Word. However, a sensitive pastor will sooner or later discover (sometimes the hard way) that our sermons are immensely enhanced if we learn to be good listeners; listening not just to what people say, but also to what is behind the words. Such listening is a form of loving.

The New Revised Standard Version of Colossians 4:5 reads as follows: “Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer everyone.” This rendering of the text sounds too much as if we Christians have all the answers, which in turn may tempt us to be overly eager to answer questions people aren’t asking. I prefer the New English Bible translation: “Study how to talk with each person you meet.” Or better yet, the Jerusalem Bible: “Try to fit your answers to the needs of each one.”

In other words, be sensitive to the needs of people to whom you seek to witness. Don’t let your oratorical skills, or your persuasive arguments, or the evangelism techniques somebody has taught you, run away with you to the point that people become objects rather than persons with genuine needs.

I count myself fortunate to have been introduced to A.A. at an early stage in my ministerial life. It happened while I was serving my first parish in High Bridge, New Jersey, which was not a happy experience. I was going through days of near desperation, because the congregation had all the trademarks of a complacent little club, but few of the New Testament characteristics of a fellowship (*koinonia*) in Christ. We were known as the clam chowder church, because every Friday the ladies aid society sold the best clam chowder in the region at a very reasonable price.

I didn’t know what to expect when a stranger accosted me in front of the post office one day and asked whether I would be willing to come to an A.A. meeting at the Methodist Church that evening and speak a few words in recognition of his six months sobriety. I accepted in fear and trembling. What if I said the wrong thing and afterward some of them would rush to the nearest bar and drown their disappointment in drink? In fact, that night I discovered elements of true fellowship that I had been vainly looking for in my church: confession, mutual acceptance, a willingness to stand ready and help another human being in need, be it day or night. During the next few years I delivered quite a few A.A. talks in the surrounding counties, always receiving more than I gave.

The next important step in my post-seminary development took place at the Kirkridge Retreat Center in Bangor, Pennsylvania. During the 1960's, I was privileged to meet there regularly with an ecumenical group of pastors committed to church renewal. The place offered such wonderful opportunities to meet "significant others," caring people endowed with the gift of graceful knowledge (graceful not in the sense of elegant or eloquent speech, but in the sense of Christ-inspired).

Douglas Steere, Quaker philosopher and author of, among other books, *Listening to Another* became one of those very special persons to me. I remember him saying that when two people engage in a conversation, there are really six parties present. First, what each person actually said in so many words – two parties. Then, what each person heard the other person say – two more parties. Finally, what each person really meant to say--making it six parties.

"Listening Groups" in our second parish became one of the most meaningful experiences for me and my wife. It is really amazing how mysteriously simple it is, and yet so radical, going to the roots of human relationships. Break-downs in communication or the lack of any sharing in churches where people "know" each other only in the most superficial way, turns congregations into lonely crowds and often leads to conflicts. Genuine listening can bring about remarkable break-throughs in human relationships.

Martin Buber, author of the classic book *I-Thou*, who taught that all true living is meeting, tells the story about a student who called him one night and, with a tone of urgency in his voice, asked to meet with him. Buber was preoccupied with a writing project, but made an appointment for the next day. During that night the young man committed suicide. Said Buber in sadness: "I failed to hear the unuttered." We must love enough to hear what is behind the words.

VII

THE PASTOR AS LEADER

Ministers must be good listeners. They must also lead. In order to pastor a congregation, a person needs to have a vision and the ability to motivate others to follow. To be an attentive listener can never be a substitute for leadership.

I can see some of my younger colleagues frown at talk like this. In some circles my ideas about leadership are not exactly fashionable. There are people who claim that the leadership model is authoritarian in its very nature. They advocate a more therapeutic approach and prefer to call themselves “facilitators.” There is also much talk today about the “wounded healer.” And indeed, we pastors are sinners who tell other sinners about the God of grace. That doesn’t mean, however, that the dysfunctional should lead the dysfunctional, always processing feelings without making decisions.

Don’t misunderstand me. Process is important. An understanding of the dynamics of social interaction is essential to leading a congregation. Without such insights unavoidable tensions will all too easily be allowed to fester till they poison the whole body of the church. Splits because of petty conflicts are unfortunately one of the most common curses in ecclesiastical life.

Process is important, and so is frankness about one’s own vulnerability. It is certainly not a threat to ministerial authority for a pastor to share his or her own humanity with parishioners. We are all pilgrims together. Still, leadership involves the courage to take a stand (to dare to stand out, which what it literally means to *exist*), to offer a vision and to act on it. Sometimes that can involve painful confrontation rather than facilitating “the process”.

During the 1960s sensitivity training sessions, encounter groups and conflict labs were the rage, especially among “mainline” denominational leaders. Those exercises in confrontation, sometimes lasting a week or longer, usually had a powerful impact on the participants. It involved a breakdown of defenses; then the process of restoration through group support, followed in many cases by an exhilarating almost Dionysian sense of liberation. One head of a denomination confided to me that for him it had been like a second conversion.

I have never regretted those experiences, although I later came to recognize the immense potentials for manipulation and the dangers of a semi-pagan “gospel of the gut,” which proclaims the joys of just doing it. Follow your feelings! The Bible, by contrast, reveals to us the reality of demons who ride the waves of human impulse and passion. So many who have reached out for a

transcendent ecstasy, have not found spirituality, but - like Goethe's Faust - have fallen prey to sensuality:

“Thinking's done with, for ever so long, Learning and knowledge have sickened me, then let unloose our passions, Sound the depths of sensuality.”

Confrontation, which can be either creative or destructive, was not something Jesus avoided. He practiced it, sometimes with a sharp edge (“You hypocrites!”), at other times more gently (“go in peace and sin no more”), but always seeking to lead people to self-examination and hopefully to transformation. Nicodemus, the intellectual who came to Jesus in the darkness of night to talk theology, became all flustered when confronted with his need for rebirth. He mumbled something silly about returning to one's mother's womb. The rich young ruler wanted to discuss God's law, while avoiding the divine imperatives for his own life. The Samaritan woman, whom Jesus did not allow to live on with the dirty little secrets about her sexual escapades, at first tried to shift the subject from her life to liturgy (Where ought one to worship?), but ended up inviting other townsfolk to come and hear this remarkable prophet.

So there are times when pastoral leadership involves facilitating the process. Then there are occasions when it calls for confrontation, especially with people determined to maintain the status quo, both in their personal lives and in the parish. To know what to do when requires a prayerful search of one's own inner heart and motives.

VIII

THE INFORMATION AGE

Step by step our society has moved into the Information Age. The socio-economic, political as well as cultural consequences of that quiet revolution are immense. Today new job opportunities that offer a promising future can sooner be found in the communication than in the manufacturing sector of the economy. Children learn how to surf the Internet at an ever earlier age. Dictators are scrambling desperately in an attempt to find ways to maintain a closed society as people gain access to cyberspace.

The church too is in the information/communication business. As a matter of fact, always has been. From the very beginning the church's mission has taken the form of a proclamation of the gospel. We address the world with the "facts" of divine revelation, the acts of God's blessed intervention into human history. We inform all who will listen of the faith through which believers through the centuries have found renewal of life.

In countries where modern technology has triumphed, it could be said that Christian ministers are preaching to the best informed congregants ever. But in what sense is that true? How does the easy accessibility of TV sets, E-mail and fax machines affect the way we witness or people's ability to truly hear the message of the gospel? We live in the promised land of "know how." With the help of media wizards, we now have the technological capability to broadcast the gospel to the outermost ends of the earth. However, we also live in a culture of informational overload, junk mail and data fatigue. In addition, our churches suffer from an ever escalating biblical illiteracy.

T.S. Eliot, with his usual insightfulness, raised the following question:

"Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge
And where is the knowledge we have lost in information?"

Indeed, information does not necessarily add up to knowledge, and knowledge does not automatically imply wisdom.

The Bible has a good deal to say about wisdom, both the kind that (in St. Paul's words) "puffs up" and the kind that nourishes the mind and the soul. On occasion it is called "hidden wisdom" or a mystery that is revealed to us, i.e. we are given insight into God's redemptive dealings with the world. According to the New Testament we see the mystery most clearly revealed in the story of a person: Jesus of Nazareth. In him, and especially in his self-sacrifice, we gain insight into the mystery of divine love.

How to help people in our wired society move beyond information into the realm of faith? Faith, in biblical context, is not the same as feeling religious or believing that there is a

God. Rather, faith involves an encounter with the Holy One, the living God, who addresses us, judges us, and mercifully meets us in our most needy moments.

There is an ancient theological tradition that states that faith seeks understanding. Not, let me emphasize, in the sense of an explanation. A mystery explained, as if it were a puzzle to be solved, ceases to be a mystery. Understanding here means insight into a very special reality, an insight that helps us make sense out of life. In Matthew 13 Jesus tells his disciples that he teaches through parables for the benefit of those who have the key to the mystery of the Kingdom, i.e. those who have come to recognize that the power of God's new age is present in the person of Jesus himself.

Millions upon millions of people in our Information Age are uninformed, or misinformed about the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. Instant access to cyberspace does not provide answers for the hungers of the human heart. Creatures bearing the divine image cannot live by information alone; they need inspiration. The Holy Spirit is able and willing to put us in a position similar to that of the disciples who met the Lord and received the key to the mystery of the Kingdom. "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! (Romans 11:33).

IX

INTELLECT - INSIGHT - INTEGRITY

Martin Heidegger is generally regarded one of the great philosophers of the last century, who also exercised a considerable influence on Christian theology. He has written profound analyses of the differences between authentic and inauthentic existence, the latter having to do with living in the world of “das Man” – the world of “they,” where surrender to the crowd leads to a betrayal of one’s true being. Heidegger taught that “mere intelligence is a semblance of spirit masking its absence.” At the same time, this man was an admirer of Adolf Hitler who sold out his Jewish academic colleagues.

Hannah Arendt has generally been recognized as a major figure among Jewish intellectuals. She achieved fame after publication of her book on “the banality of evil,” a study dealing with the Nazi Holocaust. And yet, all her adult life she was Heidegger’s devoted disciple and lover. Which leads one to wonder: How come that smart people often don’t seem to make sense? Or, how much wisdom do they display in their life decisions?

It all goes back to T. S. Eliot’s question about knowledge and wisdom, or intellectual theory and personal integrity, or scholarship and humanity. For instance, the name Gerhard Kittel is famous in biblical scholarly circles, especially since it is associated with a prestigious multi-volume theological dictionary. However, Herr Professor Kittel also defended the view that the Jewish people, rather than being part of a *Heilsgeschichte* (God’s saving activity in the world), belonged to an *Unheilsgeschichte* (damnation history). All of which makes me wonder how far removed this learned scholar was from the S.S. officer, who stared at my mother with his cold eyes after having informed her of the death of my father in the concentration camp Mauthausen, and told her that there was no need for tears. It wasn’t a question of what kind of person my father had been, he explained, but of “the blood in the veins.”

So many other brilliant people could be mentioned. It has recently been revealed that T. S. Eliot himself, that great cultural critic, had not completely surmounted the spirit of anti-Semitism that hung so heavily in the intellectual air of his day. George Bernard Shaw, an arch skeptic in many ways, shows in his published letters that he had a penchant for dictators: Mussolini, Hitler, Stalin. As the longshoreman philosopher Eric Hoffer emphasized over and over again, many intellectuals are theoretical revolutionaries, who prefer not to live with the consequences of their ideas when people of action start putting them into practice.

As we have seen, in order for knowledge to become wisdom, insight is required. A few other qualities should help as well: humility, a little humor, a sense of humanity, in short: integrity. We so easily fall in love with our own mind-creations, often propounded with “skillful words of human wisdom” (I Corinthians 2:4 . Good News Bible). They tend to become our dogmatisms, even our prejudices.

Nietzsche used to say that he had moved from the house of the scholars, because his soul had sat empty at their table for too long. This non-believing son of a pious Lutheran pastor sounds a warning to Christian theologians, the scholars of the church. Those who know a lot but do not love, do not care deeply about the daily struggles of people, cannot lead us into the deeper truths.

The problem does not lie in the intellectual pursuit *per se*, nor does the answer lie in a spirit of anti-intellectualism with its shoddy scholarship. Books like David Wells' *No Place for Truth* and Mark Noll's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind*, remind us of the dangers for the Church of intellectual laziness, especially when promoted in the name of spirituality and piety. The scriptures offer an answer that someone like Nietzsche never understood. It is summed up in the New Testament phrase "having the mind of Christ"(I Corinthians. 2:16). We, who can be so full of ourselves need to learn from a Lord who, in the words of the letter to the Philippians, "emptied himself." Communion with Christ through the Spirit endows thought with the quality of character.

SCHOLARS AND GENTLE MEN

Professors, like that forlorn comedian Rodney Dangerfield, often feel that they get no respect, or at least do not receive recognition commensurate with what they perceive their contribution to society to be. Their alleged absentmindedness makes them the butt of many jokes. They are portrayed as people who spin their ephemeral theories and then fall in love with their own abstractions, which bear little relationship to life.

I think of a Søren Kierkegaard's scornful references to "the Professor," the prototype of a person who builds a beautiful castle and then proceeds to live in a shack next door. The academic elite had either ignored or made light of his writings. He feared, however, that some day "a mob of professors and dons" would co-opt his work for academic analysis. "Yes thank you!" he wrote in the *Journals* of his later years, "When I die, there will be something for the professors! These wretched rascals!... The professors will still make a profit of me, they will lecture away, perhaps with the additional remark that the peculiarity of this man is that he cannot be lectured about". How right he turned out to be!

I must confess that there have been times when an academic career seemed an attractive option to me. The few opportunities I have had to fill in for seminary professors on sabbatical leave have given me a good deal of satisfaction. I have always felt that if I had stuck with my original training in law, I could have lived quite happily as an attorney. I feel the same way about teaching. Interacting with students can indeed be a very exciting challenge.

At the same time, I share some of the skepticism of a Kierkegaard or an Eric Hoffer. Professors can take themselves too seriously. They should really try to be more comfortable with the clown that is part of all of us. Theologians, in particular, should never forget that, in the final analysis, we believers are all fools for Christ's sake. It is just too sad when playing the role of professor prevents one from being a genuine person, someone who cares and is not afraid to remain a student among students.

As I rummage through old files I discover some wonderful reminders of professors who were there for me. For instance, I came across a January 28, 1960 letter from my one-time teacher Justin VanderKolk in which he raised a variety of theological issues. He was a systematic theologian who had grown up on a farm in Michigan, a man with certain Dutch-mystical propensities that sometimes manifested themselves in a spirit of moodiness. We talked much about John Calvin and Karl Barth, his favored theologians, but it was better not to mention Paul Tillich too much, because with wild swings of his massive hands he would let one know what was wrong with that theologian's thoughts.

Toward the end of the aforementioned letter, he suddenly switched the subject to our young daughter Judy who had just been diagnosed as suffering from rheumatic fever. Was I

familiar, he wanted to know, with the wonderful booklets and games available for children who were confined to bed? A \$20 bill was enclosed for the purchase of such items. As I read this years later, I am touched by this teacher's gentle kindness.

Then I find a letter from Hendrikus Berkhof, a highly respected theologian in worldwide ecumenical circles. In 1962 he had spent the pre-Christmas week at our home. Afterward, writing in Dutch, he rehearsed some of the issues we had discussed during those days, concluding, however with a few paragraphs in English, addressing each of our five children by name. He wanted to thank them for making him feel at home, adding some words of wisdom about Santa Clause and the reindeer. Blessed is the scholar who still knows the child within!

Finally, I want to mention a –for me –memorable luncheon meeting with James McCord, then president of Princeton Theological Seminary. We had established an acquaintanceship through our common friendship with Berkhof. He had asked me to meet him at a local restaurant. “Listen,” he said immediately after our drinks had arrived, “Hank (Berkhof) is urging me to persuade you to go for a doctorate. I’d love to have you in our program, but I’m concerned about your family. Your wife and children have already made considerable sacrifices so that you could pursue your studies. Therefore, my advice is this: if you can’t live without the degree, go for it. Otherwise, be the best pastor-scholar you can be.”

In subsequent years Jim McCord and I have had occasional contacts. We never became close friends and I can't recall any other conversation of a personal nature. But I admire that man, as a scholar, an administrator, an ecumenical leader, who for a few brief moments became my counselor--a gentle man who cared for a young pastor and his family.

Knowledge will pass away, Paul assures us in I Corinthians 13, and so will theological and administrative expertise, but love and kindness will endure forever. They come from God and will return to God in his Kingdom.

XI

HEILSGESCHICHTE

I suspect that most pastors who try to keep up with theological trends have some area of special interest. For me that area has been the theology of history. It started with a college course on various philosophies of history when as part of my research assignment, I began reading works by the Dutch scholar Arnold van Ruler who later became my mentor in postgraduate studies. He, more than anyone else, helped me think through the doctrine of the Holy Spirit, not just in personal-mystical terms, but also in historical and cosmic terms. Probing the interrelationships between the biblical message about Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit and the Kingdom of God has over the years preoccupied my thinking and writing.

During my seminary days Oscar Cullmann's book *Christ and Time* was on the *must* reading list. In 1964 my own book *Redemption and Historical Reality* was published. I have often wished that we had chosen the title "Holy Spirit and History," indicating my intention to further develop the "Christ and Time" theme.

In the Bible history is the big story. It is the story about the beginning and the end, about God the Creator of heaven and earth and the promised recreation of all things. The biblical message is infused with the vision of the coming Kingdom of God, of a new heaven and a new earth where peace and righteousness shall dwell. The prophets of Israel were futurists who looked at history in light of what the Lord God had done in the past and had promised for the future. Jesus, the gospels tell us, came to preach the gospel of the Kingdom.

In the Judeo-Christian tradition history is viewed as a divine-human drama with a specific plot and a final denouement. For the Church, Jesus is the central character in that drama. In his life and ministry he embodied, not only the message, but also the power of the Kingdom. In his self-sacrifice he revealed the nature of divine love for a world that had lost its way. As Christians we confess him as the living Lord, which in essence means that in the power of the Spirit we experience his saving presence. In the language of the New Testament, we receive a foretaste of things to come. The Holy Spirit gives history its hidden meaning of *Heilsgeschichte*, the power of God's new age operative in the here and now, a story of redemption received in faith.

I love the cosmic drama of the Bible, told in prophecies, poetry, parables and letters that let us listen in on the correspondence of apostles with local churches as if they were addressing our own congregation. It is all so much more exciting than the egocentric conversion stories that so often are filled with pious platitudes or the therapeutic navel gazing that now also seems to be gaining popularity among evangelicals.

Not that I want my –or anybody else's –personal story to get lost in the big story! Nor is that the Bible's intention. Our stories belong in the drama, but not at center stage. We are

creatures of time, coping as best we can with our past and with a future that has not yet arrived, but is still present either in hope or in fear.

Who of us does not carry the burdens of unfinished agendas: the wrong choices, the missed chances, the wasted years perhaps? Who does not know regrets, remorse and, yes, the reality of guilt? If only we could retrace our steps in time as we are able to do in space! What road shall we take when we come to that fork in our pilgrim's path: the way of self-examination or the way of self-justification? Does self-forgiveness ever work?

Those are important questions in the big story of the Bible. And at center stage we see the cosmic drama of the cross of Christ, where the Holy One deals with the awesome forces of evil and guilt in order to restore at-one-ment and offer the world reconciliation.

And what about the future? In ten days I will be meeting with cancer specialists at the University of Colorado in Denver. It could be a *Kairos* moment in my life. My theology of history has always been a theology of hope, but what do our cosmic visions amount to when we come face to face with the reality of cancer? In the context of the big story, the divine-human drama now suddenly becomes very personal.

When attending Catechism class in Holland, question and answer one of the Heidelberg confession were hammered into our minds:

“What is your only comfort in life and death? That I, with body and soul, both in life and in death, am not my own, but belong to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ.”

We all learned to quote those words by heart and had to pass written tests in order to be confirmed. The real tests of faith usually come later in life. If we pass them, it is not by works, but by grace. I belong! The Lord of the universe, who rules the destiny of nations, cares about me.

XII

KNOWING ONESELF

Know thyself! The call to self-discovery has been sounded throughout the centuries by sages of many religious as well as non-religious traditions. The unexamined life is not worth living. Find out who the real you is!

“The longest journey,” wrote the one-time UN General Secretary Dag Hammarskjöld in his wonderful book *Markings*, “is the journey inward.” As a matter of fact, it is a life-long journey, because a human being is never a finished product. To be truly human on this side of eternity means daring to live as someone who is always becoming. Nietzsche described human existence as “a dangerous on the way.” The pilgrim of the soul has embarked upon a risky adventure.

Self-knowledge requires a good dose of honesty, humility and a sense of humor about oneself. It involves a candid look at what we are really like. The Bible makes no bones about that. Long before Sigmund Freud wrote about the forces of inner resistance among those who undergo psychotherapy, the scriptures spoke clearly about our penchant for avoiding the frightening experience of probing the darker corners of our souls.

Jesus spoke harshly about the hypocrisy we frequently manifest when looking at history compared to when we study natural phenomena. “You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?” (Luke 12:56). History requires that we look critically at human behavior, including our own actions. However, while it is hard to look honestly at our involvements in history, how much more self-deceiving do we tend to be when looking into our own hearts.

In Arthur Miller’s play *Death of a Salesman* we meet Willy Loman, the happy-go-lucky character who believed in the gospel of success and preached it to his sons. When at the age of 63 the dream of big deals came crashing down like the castle of illusions it had always been, Willy killed himself. “He never knew who he was.” In that one brief sentence his son gave Loman’s spiritual biography. In Miller’s later play, *After the Fall*, the character Quentin too must come face to face with failure. He, however, had the courage to ask the painful question; “Is the knowing all? And the wish to kill is never killed, but with some gift of courage one may look into its face when it appears and with a stroke of love--as to an idiot in the house _forgive it; again and again _forever?”

Forgiveness is what we ministers of the Word are called to proclaim, but we are not supposed to peddle it like cheap grace. It is incumbent upon us to explain how it involves facing

oneself before a God who is holy, righteous, as well as merciful. Confession, some will say is too easy. That may be true in the sense of “going to confession” as a religious routine. To do it as an act of honest self-examination before God is another matter however, and will be perceived as too easy only by people who have never tried it. In fact, it can be agonizingly difficult.

It seems to me that the spirit of our age is not very receptive to the Christian message of redemption. The voices of self-discovery are everywhere to be heard. It is the message of a host of New Age evangelists--a sort of counter-gospel. While the Church invites people to come to know themselves as forgiven sinners, liberated by divine love, New Age philosophies call sin a delusion and invite people to discover their own divine nature.

That's tough competition! The God who is US (or the U.S.) will always be more popular than the Lord of the Universe who addresses us, calling us to repentance and renewal of life. Yet, what an exciting challenge it is to help others encounter the living Lord through the Word! “Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God is One. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

XIII

CHOOSING ONESELF

Know thyself and--to thine own self be true! Self-knowledge needs a next step: self-acceptance, or –in Paul Tillich’s phrase - “the courage to be.” Knowing the truth about oneself does not necessarily make free. It can lead one deeper and deeper into the black hole of guilt. No one can truly be himself or herself while in bondage to an unresolved past.

The courage to be – to *exist* (literally “to stand out”) requires the ability to resist the pressures of the crowd, the world of “They” where acceptance comes at the cost of becoming a copy. “Where are you?” asked Thomas à Kempis in *The Imitation of Christ*,² when you are not present to yourself?” We can live as captives of the past, or in a fear-ridden future that hasn’t even arrived, or submerged in the world of “They” where there is no personal responsibility, because only the collective counts. When crowds kill, they usually do so in the belief that no one in particular has done the evil deed.

“Love thy neighbor as thyself.” There must be self-affirmation before there can be a giving of self in love to others. To what extent do our pastoral ministry and/or our parish life nurture that kind of self-acceptance? A crucial question indeed, especially since the cross stands at the center of our gospel of grace, a message that seeks to give a person “the courage to accept oneself as accepted in spite of being unacceptable.” (Tillich).

We have so often failed to get our message across. Nietzsche’s experiences in the Lutheran household in which he grew up led him to conclude that Christianity is “a metaphysics of the hangman.” Ayn Rand, the high priestess of unbridled capitalism, argued that the Church preaches “a sacrificial animal doctrine” which in essence teaches self-hatred. According to A.S. Neile, *Summerhill*, a school dedicated to a radical approach to child rearing, was founded to inculcate a new religion based on knowledge of self and acceptance of self, because it was felt that most churches preached a “faith” that was afraid of life.

How come that highly intelligent and creative people have totally missed the point? One could think of many reasons, one of them being that what they heard and saw in church had led them astray.

The Christian gospel is about self-affirmation through confession and an experience of forgiveness. It is not about narcissism. The philosopher Fichte threw a big party when his son pronounced the word “I” for the first time. A most important breakthrough had occurred! The ego had postulated its own existence. The very last word in Ayn Rand’s book *Anthem* is a fully capitalized EGO. “I am done with the monster of “we,” the word of serfdom--And now I see the face of God, and I raise this god over the earth, this god whom men have sought since men came into being, this god who will grant them joy and peace and pride. This god, this one word: “I.”

Such thinking carries us far away from the words of Jesus: “He who loses his life shall find it.” His message is not about getting lost in the world of “They,” nor about discovering the divine in the world of EGO. Jesus spoke about the gift of love, where serving is the opposite of serfdom.

One of the great problems in our “mainline” churches is that we all too rarely see breakthrough moments in people’s lives. Some of our fundamentalist friends will recommend a little more hell-fire preaching as an appropriate cure for this condition. In so many cases, however, fundamentalism comes across as more of a fear than a faith phenomenon, seeking safety in the non-reflective life.

Nevertheless, I do believe that a greater sense of evangelical urgency would stand many of us mainline pastors in good stead; in our preaching, our counseling, and our approach to community outreach programs. We tend to be too hung up about the word “conversion.” Must searchers flock to self-help groups in order to find out that radical transformation of life is a real possibility? I am reminded of Nietzsche’s remark that he would like to believe that all those Christians were liberated people if only they looked a little more like it.

Every true confession of the Christian faith contains an element of self-affirmation. God so loved the world - so loves me - that he sends his Son, and through the Spirit, pours his love into our hearts. That should be more than enough to make a person feel very special.

XIV

DON'T BOX ME IN

While attending law school at the University of Leiden in the Netherlands, a bulletin board notice caught my attention. An American theologian by the name of Reinhold Niebuhr would present a luncheon hour lecture in the student center. Being a commuting student from The Hague, because I couldn't afford room rent, I decided to find shelter during the lunch hour and listen to the lecture.

I caught very little from the visitor's highly dialectical speech. However, I recall distinctly Niebuhr's answer when someone inquired during the question period whether he considered himself a neo-orthodox theologian. He said that he tried to avoid being boxed in, because once people have you neatly categorized, they tend to ignore nuances of thought and forget what you are really saying. Soon thereafter a Dutch translation of Niebuhr's book *Signs of the Times*, received as a birthday gift, got me going on a study of the works of this fine scholar and influenced my later switch from law to theology.

New boxes for packaged theology are being produced all the time. Karl Barth, greatly perturbed by what was being peddled as "Barthianism," was moved to remark that the great curse the Lord had visited upon him were the Barthians. During the past decades we have been treated to the Death of God theology, the theology of hope soon turned into a theology of revolution, liberation theology, little boxes with ethnic and feminist theologies, all containing valid perspectives, but eventually packaged to be offered as all-inclusive principles of biblical interpretation. There will always be those who look for new fads on the theological menu, just like the Athenians in Paul's day who "would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:2 1). A "relentless cult of novelty" (Solzhenitzyn) has become one of the marks of much modern culture.

Don't box me in! Spare me the party-line theologies, the packaged orthodoxies on both the Right and the Left. It's all too heavy and too humorless for me. It tends to bring out the *enfant terrible* in me, the "troubler in Israel" (I Kings 18:17) or the gadfly, who occasionally likes to interject a taboo subject into the discussions.

A recent letter from a friend of mine contained the following opening sentence: "You are a pugnacious old bastard, Isaac, trying to start a good fight." I took that remark as an affectionate, albeit somewhat backhanded compliment. He was reacting to an "open letter" I had addressed to Rabbi Leon Klenicki of the Anti-Defamation League of B 'Nai B'rith, a partner in dialogue for many years. Could it be, I had wondered aloud, that the Christian-Jewish dialogue was drifting into an elitist posture with an inner circle controlling an agenda with which they had come to feel comfortable? It was the kind of critical query from an insider that usually is met with thunderous silence.

My ten- year stint as a denominational bureaucrat has done more than anything else to instill in me a touch of skepticism about establishment positions. I don't mind to be called a "pugnacious old bastard," but it would pain me if I were to be perceived as a person who had totally lost his sense of humor.

"Group think" is the enemy of honest dialogue. The same is true of a party-line mentality that lets organizational loyalty set limits to independent inquiry. In all immodesty, let me mention one letter among the many I received during my 70th birthday celebration. A friend from academia wrote the following: "No one owns your soul--not the establishment, not any denomination, not the National Council of Churches, not the National Dialogue leadership, not bureaucrats, not the A.D.L. or the A.J.C., only your Lord." These words touched me deeply. God knows, my soul too has been sold out at times. I have tried, however, not to let blessed associations be turned into little boxes that stifle the spirit of critical inquiry.

XV

LIFE'S AMBIGUITIES

Life is full of ambiguities, inconsistencies and contradictions. The Christian life is no exception, nor is the pastoral ministry. The New Testament admonishes us to be “fools for Christ’s sake,” but there are times when we are simply fools.

People are funny, although not always intentionally so. When we are funny because of our frailties and foibles, we tend to hide behind our facades. The role of the comedian then becomes to prick the bubble, rip off the mask and reveal human nature without the cosmetics.

Late-night talk show hosts look for a laugh by focusing on the ambiguities of life, and especially those that are the result of our inconsistent behavior. In other words, they find humor in our self-inflicted dilemmas. “What is ambiguity?” goes the old joke. “To see your sixteen year old daughter return home at four in the morning with a Gideon Bible under her arm.” Gotcha! The realm of religion, or rather of people claiming to be religious, is not considered off limits to the comic. Quite the contrary, they are a favored topic, like TV evangelists lambasting the loss of family values who are found to be engaged in sexual escapades.

Politicians too are prime targets, because the discrepancies between what they say (about public service, for instance) and what they do can be devastatingly revealing of the human condition. The joke is usually not on the poor soul who is going through hard times, but on the powerful and the pompous who behave pretentiously. In the great Charlie Chaplin movies the laugh is at the expense of the pontificating gentleman who slips on a banana peel, not the child who falls off a bicycle. It is the person who puts on appearances whose blown up ego needs a bit of deflating by means of the humorous put-down.

What does all this have to do with the Christian faith? Methinks quite a bit, because faith has a good deal to do with the removal of facades through an honest facing of the self in an atmosphere of grace. Furthermore, beyond the element of embarrassment because of our inconsistent behavior, there is the question of our guilt. Guilt is not a laughing matter, but before the Lord of mercy we learn to live with our foibles in the knowledge of forgiveness. That certainly adds a touch of lightheartedness to life. It also enhances honesty in the face of ambiguity.

Let us say that I—a pastor—have a number of gold shares in my IRA. A friend had told me that they were sure to yield a considerable profit within a short period of time, but that was several years ago and now they are worth less than when I bought them. One night a news flash crosses the TV screen announcing a major disaster in the largest South African gold mine, followed almost instantly by the thought flashing across my mind: “Maybe this is my moment!”

An unguarded moment, but also a very revealing because it forces me to face the fact that it is not just the wicked captains of industry who are capable of putting profit above people. Under certain circumstances, love can so easily lose out, also in the lives of Christians.

Faith has to do with the lordship of the Lord. Thus it allows me to relax a little, to gain some perspective, perhaps even to laugh at myself. Before the God who forgives, I can let myself be vulnerable, confess even my worst frailties and failures.

So, humor is nourished by faith. Reinhold Niebuhr, in a sermon on Psalm 2:4 (“He who sits in the heavens laughs —”) described the laugh as a prelude to faith, the beginning of prayer, but also as a no-man’s land between faith and despair. “Be of good cheer; I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Thus says the Lord. When we can look beyond tragedy and failure to the triumph of divine grace, we will be able to embrace life with a smile and say with a sigh of relief: “God loves me. Amazing grace!”

XVI

HUMOR KEEPS HOPE ALIVE

The above title is taken from the book *Tomorrow's Child*, by the Brazilian theologian Rubem Alves. Our occasional luncheon conversations while he was residing at Union Theological Seminary in New York and I was working across the street in the Interchurch Center, used to brighten up my life as a denominational bureaucrat. In 1973, as we met in Bangkok for a World Council of Churches conference, he kindly invited me to join him, Gustavo Gutierrez and other South American theologians for a Sunday of sightseeing around the city. My memory of that day is one of much good humor and laughter, as well as regret on my part that a lack of knowledge of the Spanish language made me miss many of the punch lines. These people were pioneers in the development of liberation theology and, in the midst of all the merriment and camaraderie, there were lively discussions about the nature of revolution.

It has long been my view that there are basically two types of revolutionaries: those driven by frustration and anger, people who often turn out to be humorless tyrants, and those drawn by a vision, who pursue dreams without destroying lives. It was clear to me that my Latin American colleagues belonged to the latter group. They knew the meaning of struggle in the face of injustice, but they did not envision the establishment of an instant Utopia through violence. At times, as I ponder my disagreements with liberation theology, I remember the spontaneous laughter that was part of those people's lives.

Humor keeps hope alive. Steve Allen has said that humor is a "humanizing agent." As such, I believe humor has a touch of holiness about it. Even in the darkness of oppression, humor has helped people to preserve a sense of humanity and has kept hope alive. Black humor and Jewish humor especially bear witness to that. They were born in pain. Mark Twain was right when he observed that the secret source of humor is often not joy but sorrow.

Where there is no hope, humor tends to become cynical and sick. The hollow sound of the horse laugh is nothing to laugh about. So often it is the sound of anger and a nihilistic despair.

Humor keeps hope alive. And, as the Bible indicates in many places, hope keeps people alive. The scriptures have much to say about rejoicing in hope, because the God of Israel, revealed in Jesus of Nazareth, is a "God of hope" (Romans 15:13).

"O, Israel hope in the Lord,
For with the Lord there is steadfast love."
Psalm 130:7

“Hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured out into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us.”

Romans 5:5

We rejoice in hope, because of God’s act of love in Jesus. Such hope keeps humor alive. The future belongs not to the contradictions that tear up existence, but to the One whom Jesus called Father, and whom we—because of Him—may call our Father in heaven.

XVII

WHEN LAUGHTER LIBERATES

The famous passage in I Corinthians 13 assures us that “faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.” That is also true in the case of humor: it needs faith; it needs hope, but above all it needs love. Love and compassion inspire the kind of laughter that liberates.

A good comedian will prick the bubble of inflated egos; will use humor to poke fun at the foibles of human nature, but will not seek to destroy people’s selfhood. Sarcasm, for instance, is not funny, nor is the laughter of derision.

The one time that the Bible mentions God’s laughter in Psalm 2:4, it is a word of judgment:

“He who sits in the heavens laughs;
the Lord has them in derision.
Then he will speak to them in his wrath,
and terrify them in his fury...

There comes a point when human folly and sin lead to situations that are nothing to laugh at. I remember many jokes being told during the years of Nazi occupation, but they were more like an act of resistance for the sake of survival. In short, they were weapons in the arsenal of spiritual/psychological warfare.

Sometimes, however, our laugh of derision is a display of cruelty when compassion is really called for. We are all such funny people, so complex, so full of contradictions, so inclined to see the speck in our neighbor’s eye, while ignoring the log in our own. The gospel seeks to make us aware of our common needs, especially our common need for confession, love and mutual forgiveness. It is that kind of experience that makes room for joy, laughter and humor in life.

There is “a time to weep and a time to laugh” (Ecclesiastes 3:4). Is that also true of the worship hour? In many a worship service people have wept, shedding tears of sorrow and repentance. But also wiped away tears of joy! Surely we need moments of humor and laughter in the house of the Lord.

Our encounter with God is serious business, but seriousness is not to be confused with somberness, nor is somberness to be confused with saintliness. When I was growing up in the Netherlands, there was a segment of the Christian community who were referred to as “the black

stocking church.” Not only were black stockings worn as a show of piety, but black suits and dresses as well. Bright and cheerful colors, especially when worn on the Sabbath, were considered a sign that one lacked a true sense of one’s unworthiness before the throne of heaven.

God forbid that a laugh should resound through those sanctuaries! How sad, and what a lost opportunity for witness! I suspect that this kind of church environment has turned many children against the religion espoused by their devout parents.

Nietzsche, who grew up in a pious Lutheran home, is an example. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who became a martyr in the resistance against Hitler, was raised in a somewhat similar environment. However, by the grace of God he was able to write in one of his letters from prison that “absolute seriousness is not without a dose of humor.”

For those of us who are called to Christian ministry, there are, of course, limits to what we should do in order to get a laugh. I recently saw a workshop advertised on “Entertainment Evangelism.” That I find a bit scary. What’s next? Seminary professors offering a course on how to be humorous? A disturbingly funny thought, indeed.

Humor has a touch of holiness, as long as we don’t try too hard, turning the joy of the Lord into just another technique and a service of worship and adoration into a staged show. The liberating laugh is a gift of grace and a sign of redemption. “Rejoice!” wrote St. Paul from a prison cell, “again, I say, rejoice! The Lord is at hand!” (Philippians 4:4-5).

XVIII

TO BE AN AUTHOR

As I sit down to write, I sometimes wonder: Why do I keep on doing this? How did I get involved in this business of writing in the first place, especially in a language to which I had to adapt in my adult years? Paul Tillich used to say that his mind thought in German categories and that casting his ideas into Anglo idiom was very difficult indeed. German academics tend to have a special fondness for complexity, which can easily be confused with profundity.

I have always admired writers who were able to digest complex concepts in such a way that they ended up being expressed in plain and simple language. That, I have discovered, is easier said than done, especially if one wishes to avoid sounding simplistic. It sometimes seems that the agony of putting things down on paper far outweighs the ecstasy of seeing one's work published.

Why then did I persist despite so many disappointments, rejection slips, minimal financial rewards and frequent back aches? One feels so vulnerable submitting one's creations to unknown editors. Writing is a lonely business, one person's struggle with words, desiring so much to translate the excitement of the original idea into sentences that will somehow grab the reader.

I learned long ago that for my kind of writing, money cannot be the main motivator. Only once have I been paid well for my work. It happened in 1956 when *Reader's Digest* published in its "Toward More Picturesque Speech" segment a sentence I had used in a community Thanksgiving service, sent in without my knowledge by someone attending church that night. "Some forgetfulness," it said, "is due not so much to absent-mindedness, but to absent-heartedness." That was my first check as an author, and never since have I received that kind of pay per word.

Why write? I recommend it as a good exercise, especially for preachers. To write out a sermon, even if one never takes a manuscript or notes into the pulpit, is a wonderful discipline. As an occasional seminary lecturer, I have met students with a great gift of gab, but very little ability to communicate a coherent, well-focused and carefully crafted message. I suspect that a person who cannot compose a decent paragraph will probably end up as a disorganized and rambling preacher.

Still, why aspire to be an author, to see the thoughts one has thought in print between the covers of a book, a magazine or scholarly journal? What is the inner compulsion behind any creative urge? Judaism has a strong tradition about how the human creature is called upon to be God's co-worker in the perfection of the creation. Could that be it, the impulse to be co-creators with God? It's a potentially dangerous idea. I remember reading a book by Denis de Rougemont years ago. The book, entitled *The Devil's Share*, contained a chapter on "The Devil as Author."

Oh, to be like God, the great Author, the original Originator, the Creator whose Word calls forth out of nothing that which is! Surely, it is not surprising that the master Tempter will use the techniques of a magnificent counterfeit Author.

Words have power. They can serve as the instruments of idolatry, or as weapons of destruction, or as a means to get even. “The best revenge,” I once heard Susan Sonntag say during an interview, “is good writing.” One can understand an almost wicked sense of delight on the part of a successful author who thinks about editors who said “No” and critics who said “No good.” However, there must be a deeper need and a nobler drive than the desire for self-justification.

Could it be that the triune God, whose image we bear and whose nature has been revealed as self-communication in love, has created us to be communicators whose mission it is to serve a covenant community, which—in turn—is called to be a sign of the coming Kingdom? In that case, to be an author might be one way of following Christ, the living Word, who in the book of Hebrews (12:2) is called “the author and perfecter of our faith.” The New Revised Standard Version has modernized the text a bit by using the word “pioneer.” Although that rendering is allowed by the Greek, I don’t want to lose the connotation of “author.” We do not worship Jesus as writer. He did not leave us a book, but he lived as the embodiment of the eternal Word. That Word becomes re-embodied in the writings of prophets, apostles, and in the power of the Holy Spirit—the written work by authors of lesser stature. In the mystery of grace, the writer becomes co-author with Christ the Lord.

XIX

BAD RELIGION

Religious people sometimes do bad things. That is an almost universally recognized fact. Christian saints are all too human. They have received the status of forgiven sinners, not achieved the state of perfection. On the other hand, religion sometimes does bad things to people. Or, to put it differently, people are victimized by bad religion. That fact is not so generally recognized, because there is a myth abroad, believed by multitudes of people, that any religion is better than no religion.

What awful cruelties have been perpetrated in the name of religion! “Men,” observed Blaise Pascal in his *Pensées*, “never do evil so completely and cheerfully as when they do it from religious conviction.” History, including the contemporary world scene, is replete with examples of that.

Here, however, I want to focus on the fact that religion can be bad for one’s health. I am thinking particularly about what has been done to people in the name of Christianity, how in some cases creativity has been stifled, while others have been crippled emotionally by false guilt and dependency relationships. What pastor has not had to deal with the victims of a distorted view as to what the Christian faith is all about? The point is often made that most religions propound some noble concepts. However, the problems with religions usually do not lie in what is preached, but in how they are practiced.

For instance, our theories about church order may contain some fine ideas. Ecclesiastical hierarchies, however, have often failed to recognize the difference, or have found it convenient to ignore the difference, between exercising spiritual authority and exhibiting authoritarian behavior. Or, the church sets out to tell the story of the gospel to the nations, but instead of converting the world, Christians conform to the standards of power, status and glamour prevalent in the surrounding culture.

Pope John XXIII’ in convening the Second Vatican Council, wanted to open the windows of the Catholic Church in order that some fresh air might blow in and bring about a spirit of *aggiornamento*, a desire to update the life of the church in the direction of gospel demands. Some participants suggested that a start in that process might be made by humanizing the clergy according to the pattern of Christ. Cardinal Paul-Emile Leger, in a speech on “Bishops and Evangelical Simplicity,” talked about “ancient splendor” as an obstacle “to working in the spirit of the gospel” and about “insignia, ornaments and titles” which are “harmful to the fulfillment of our pastoral ministry.”

A contradiction that I often find so pronounced in the Protestant world is, on the one hand, a religion that tranquilizes rather than transforms (what Peter Berger has called a “religion that ratifies the O.K. world”), and—on the other hand—a religion that produces more and more

guilt rather than provide a sense of liberation through divine love and forgiveness. In the former case every worship service becomes a spiritual happy hour where people get high on positive thoughts, often thinking more highly of themselves than, they ought to (see Romans 12:3). Sin is then a subject to be avoided, as if it were part of the unreal side of life. And where there is no sin, there is no guilt. As one of the characters in MacLeish's play *JB* puts it: "There is no guilt, my man, we are all victims of our guilt, not guilty."

Biblically speaking, we are definitely *not* all victims of our guilt, but guilty before a Holy God. However, many Christians are indeed victims of false guilt, a guilt that is not rooted in one's disobedience to God, but rather in the non-observance of rules instituted by holier-than-thou "saints," both among the clergy and lay leaders. Paul Tillich referred to those folk as "the righteous who radiate judgment."

False guilt is the product of manipulative religion, a non-creative and crippling kind of Christianity that holds people captive rather than leading them out of their houses of bondage. It's bad religion and a sad thing to behold. The victims need our prayers, and so do the victimizers.

XX

OH, FREEDOM!

Sometimes, when I feel the need for some refreshment of soul, I like to listen to Odetta's rendition of some of the classic spirituals: "No more auction block for me," "Ain't no grave can hold my body down," and especially, "Oh, freedom!"

Oh freedom, oh freedom,
Oh freedom over me,
And before I'll be a slave again,
I'll be buried in my grave.

I am attracted to writers and singers who have a passion for freedom, who with all their soul and might enter into the struggle for freedom. Nikos Kazantzakis believed that "the superior virtue is not to be free, but to fight for freedom." So also Patrick Henry in the immortal "Give me liberty or give me death" speech: "if we wish to be free, we must fight.. The battle is not to the strong alone; it is to the vigilant, the active, the brave..."

We pastors tend to shift the attention rather quickly to the abuse of freedom, a major problem indeed. For instance, in my estimation someone like Frank Sinatra singing "I did it my way"~ is more about arrogant defiance than about freedom. The Bible sees submission to and service of God as antidotes to the abuse of freedom. "Live as free people; do not, however, use your freedom to cover up any evil, but live as God's servants." (I Peter 2:16).

I want to focus on a different issue, however, namely the fear of freedom, the desire to be free from freedom. Here again we face one of the great contradictions of human existence: on the one hand the yearning of the soul to be free; on the other hand the escape from freedom, the succumbing to the world of "They," the servile surrender to totalitarian would-be Saviors.

Aldous Huxley's book *Brave New World* introduces us to the state of SOMA, which is designed to make everybody as happy as a herd can be. It is also a state of dehumanization, described by one of the characters in the book as "a Christianity without tears." People, it often seems, will sacrifice anything for stability and the comfort of not having to think, to decide or to assume responsibility.

A few decades ago Rand Corporation scientist Olaf Helmer wrote in *Time Magazine* (Feb. 25, 1966): "Drug control of personality will be widely accepted before the year 2000. If a wife or a husband seems to be unusually grouchy... a spouse will be able to pop down to the corner drugstore, buy some anti-grouch pills and slip them into the coffee." Hallelujah! It's heaven! Slip him two and he'll rush out to buy you a mink coat.

Fortunately, a few questioning voices are left in Huxley's *Brave New World*. There is, for instance, Bernard who asks Lenina: "But wouldn't you like to be free to be happy in some other way, Lenina? In your own way, for example; not in everybody else's way?" And then there is the "Savage" who cries out: "But I don't want comfort, I want God, I want poetry, I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness, I want sin."

"For freedom Christ has set us free," declares the New Testament; "Where the Spirit of the Lord is there is freedom." Believers, however, have often found it hard to live that way. The God of Israel is portrayed as the great Liberator, who delivers and leads out of captivity. But there were Israelites who, tired of the struggles, soon longed to return to the fleshpots of Egypt, the house of bondage. Christians too have all too frequently followed that path from freedom in Christ to ever new forms of slavery.

The Evil One is ever a clever devil, who knows our weaknesses. Dostoevsky's "Grand Inquisitor" wonders how he might improve on Jesus' ministry. His answer? "Take away the freedom he desired people to have and replace it with Miracle, Mystery, and Authority." Miracle and mystery will then soon be turned into magic, while authority will be turned into hierarchical control, and the people will be overcome with joy for such an awesome gift: deliverance from the torment to act as free and responsible beings created in the image of God.

Time and time again churches have fallen for such tricks. And yet, amazingly enough, the children of modernity are being described as the generation that has come of age. *Semper reformanda* was one of the battle cries of the Reformation; always reforming, always rediscovering that the life of faith and freedom is a continuous and dangerous adventure.

XXI

HERESY

Heresy is once again an “in” topic of discussion, not only among fundamentalist circles, but also in more liberal journals like *The Christian Century*. Of course, heresy trials are an entirely different matter. It recently looked for a while as if we were going to move from talk to the real thing in the denomination to which I belong. But we didn’t quite make it. At the last moment the powers that be found an alternative. They simply asked the allegedly errant pastor and his church to depart as quietly as possible. Thus a confrontation was avoided, and so was the hazard of the anti-heretics having to assume the \$1,000,000 plus debt on the facilities which, according to church policy, must remain with the denomination.

Threats of heresy trials are not that uncommon. I know that from personal experience. In 1963, while I served as the secretary of our denomination’s Theological Commission, we were embroiled in a hot dispute on how literally the creation accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 should be interpreted. I recently discovered a letter in my files from a Mr. Jay Van Sweden who apparently disapproved of my views on the matter. “As for you my friend,” he wrote, “we conservatives in this area would like to give you this challenge: write your arguments – state your liberal beliefs openly and perhaps we can have a heresy trial; that is, if our beloved church survives that long.” I did indeed openly state my not-so-liberal views, but the worst thing that happened to me was that a few years later I was appointed to the denominational bureaucracy.

Today, however, the debate is not about how one ought to read the symbolic language in either the first chapters of the book of Genesis or the last chapters of the book of Revelation. It is about the heart of the Christian message, namely the meaning of reconciliation to God through Jesus Christ. And when the heart of the gospel is at stake, the issue of heresy must be honestly faced, at least in confessional churches where basic standards of faith have been accepted. It becomes a matter of integrity. Why adopt standards, if one has no intention of standing up for them?

In principle I do not have a major problem with the idea that one’s orthodoxy must be a matter of accountability and open to critical inquiry. It’s when the practicalities come into the picture that my hesitations are aroused. It seems to me that dealing with heresy is often so much complicated by the demeanor of heresy hunters. They can be so sure, not one suspects because of deep faith, but because of fear and insecurity. They tend to prefer quick surgical procedures over a process of careful listening to one another. Demonizing one’s doctrinal opponents becomes increasingly difficult when one gets to know them as persons with honest-to-God struggles.

Doctrine is not, as Eric Hoffer would have it, “a fact-proof screen.” It is believers engaged in loving God with their minds. It has never been easy for the Church, or for that matter society at large, to determine where the limits of legitimate dissent lie. Was Socrates really a

threat to Greek society? At one time translating the Bible into the vernacular was considered an attack on the true faith. An Archbishop of Canterbury called John Wyclif “that son of the old serpent, the very herald and child of antichrist.” Sir Thomas More referred to William Tyndale as one of “the hellhounds that the devil has in his kennel.”

It has been said that orthodoxy is not loyalty to truth, but loyalty to an organization. Sometimes it is used as a tool for hierarchical self-preservation. At other times it functions as a refuge for the defenders of the status quo, what Kierkegaard called “the kind of orthodoxy which is hearty twaddle, mediocrity with a dash of sugar.”

Yes, we must contend for the truth and not fear the confrontation. I prefer to be in it for the long haul, keeping up the contacts and conversations with sincere searchers who ask heretical questions. No hurry! No hoopla! Just hard-hitting exchanges. Speedy trials and quickie ecclesiastical divorces strike me as too easy a way out. Furthermore, all that trial talk will only encourage the copycat heretics who hunger for publicity. Now, there you have folk one will want to avoid.

XXII

I-THOU

Many years ago I somewhere read the German saying *Ein Mensch ist kein Mensch*. It has stuck with me ever since. Before our consciousnesses were raised about sexist language, my favored English translation of that aphorism was that man is meant to be a fellowman, or put negatively man is not a soloist. Martin Buber summed it all up in the title of his famous booklet *I-Thou* with its central thesis that all real living is meeting. Our humanity comes to full maturity in enriching relationships or, in the words of a popular song, “You’re nobody till somebody loves you.

The key idea here can be found in the biblical creation accounts and the notion that the image of God in us has something to do with the way we encounter each other as male and female, or how the otherness of the other complements (completes) our humanity. Where older translations portrayed Eve as Adam’s “helpmate” (which can all too easily be turned into “playmate”), Wilhelm Vischer in my view caught the Hebrew connotation better by using the word “confronter.”

“The Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone;
I will make for him a help as his confronter”

Genesis 2:18

“So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God
he created them, male and female he created them”

Genesis 1:27 (NRSV)

Eric Fromm used to write about “the prison of our aloneness” and our deepest need to overcome separateness. We are now not talking about solitude, which is a matter of personal choice, but about loneliness, which often is a source of profound suffering. It is through relationships that a measure of self-realization is reached.

Of course, before we sound overly romantic, a reminder that there is another way of looking at life may be in order. An opposite view is succinctly expressed by a character in Jean-Paul Sartre’s play *No Exit* who declares that “Hell is other people.” From the empirical point of view that position might be easier to prove than Buber’s thesis. Many a marriage, entered into with heavenly dreams, has turned out to be hell where the otherness of the other proved to be too hard to handle. It takes, as we say in church, a lot of grace.

We should know, because church history is replete with hellish stories about how we have failed on that score. I am thinking particularly of two heresies that have played a prominent

role in the Church's story. There is first the heresy of individualism; the failure to understand and live out our faith in social context: the communion (*koinonia*) of believers, the community, yes the world. In the end it becomes just me enjoying Jesus in the Garden of Prayer, sharing an experience so unique that allegedly none other has ever known it. Then there is the heresy of sameness; our avoidance of diversity and our fondness for the like-minded or those who look like us.

The New Testament repeatedly emphasizes that both diversity and unity are marks of the Holy Spirit's work among us. I am now not talking about attending ecumenical conferences in Hyatt's and Intercontinental hotels. I've done my share of such ecumenical jet-setting across the globe. Here I am talking about my life as a local pastor ministering with the Lord's people. How terribly impoverished we are in our parishes if we fail to be enriched by the otherness of so many diverse others.

The problem can be traced way back to New Testament times and the tensions between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. The Jewish Christian way of worship lost out and, as a result, so did the Church at large. As a more recent example we might mention the shame of segregated churches. Such a lack of social consciousness; so much bland sameness. It is all very sad. We Christians need a lot of grace to grow up, "until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to maturity, to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13).

XXIII

FINDING GOD

“Seek the Lord while he may be found; call upon him while he is near “(Isaiah 55:6). Are there particular times of opportunity for a person to find God and experience his presence? Would what the philosopher Karl Jaspers referred to as “the boundary situations of life” pose such special opportunities? The way we answer such questions will clearly influence the way we, as pastors and congregations, reach out to those around us.

Old friends still remind me occasionally how I arrived on the American college scene talking with my heavy Dutch broke about the “brokenness of life.” I was a crisis thinker before I had ever read a book on the so-called “theology of crisis.” Five years of living under Nazi rule as a teenager, several of them in hiding on a farm, had taught me some hard lessons in the school of crisis living.

I had come out of the war very angry at God, who –I felt –had let me down, allowing my father to be murdered at a time in my life when I most needed him. I did remain a social idealist, however, studying law and economics, and holding on to the conviction that my generation would build a better world. But deep inside there was that gnawing question: What if the most decisive struggles take place in the human heart? What if we must come to ourselves before we can safely venture out to conquer the world?

In the parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15) a young man launches out on his own, determined to embrace all the challenges and excitement the world has to offer. He ended up getting lost, a lonely wreck on the dung hill among the swine. The loyalty of his friends lasted about as long as his finances held out. There, on the garbage heap the story goes on to tell us he came to himself, faced himself, went to his father and found forgiveness.

Crisis! Boundary situations! Isn’t it often under those circumstances that God is found? The facing of ourselves in honest confession can feel like the dying of a thousand deaths, but for multitudes of people it has become the road to rebirth.

“Isn’t there anything you understand?” asks Mr. Zuss in the play J. B. “It’s from the ash heap God is seen. Always! Always from the ashes. Every saint and martyr knew that.” Always? Once my beloved philosophy professor Dr. Ivan Dykstra took me aside and invited me to join him for a cup of coffee. Then he proceeded to inquire kindly whether I really believed that God could only be met in crisis and if so, how would that affect my ministry? Must people land on the garbage dumps of life before they can see the light of the gospel?

Through years of pastoring, I have learned that, in the midst of all the brokenness of life, God can be experienced in the beauty of holiness as well as in a joyful affirmation of life. And yet, the famous Japanese evangelist Kagawa touched on a key element in the gospel of the cross

when he taught that God “sits on the dust-heap among the prison convicts.” The divine light shines in the dark corners of existence.

In conclusion, let me add a note on the role of friends during times of trial, using the following quotation from Henri Nouwen’s book *Here and Now*: “I remember an experience of feeling totally abandoned . my heart in anguish, my mind going crazy with despair, my body shaking wildly. I cried, screamed, and pounded the floors and the walls. Two friends were with me. They didn’t say anything. They just were there. When, after several hours, I calmed down a little bit, they were still there. They put their arms around me and held me, rocking me like a little child. Then we simply sat on the floor. My friends gave me something to drink; I couldn’t speak. There was silence –safe silence.

Today I think of that experience as a turning point in my life. I don’t know how I would have survived without my friends.”

The prodigal son’s pleasure-seeking buddies left him in his moment of abandonment. Job’s friends, after having observed seven days of appropriate silence, started to talk and never again shut up, torturing him with their distorted theology. How fortunate we are when we see God in the faces and embraces of loving friends!

XXIV

LOSING FAITH

The New Testament takes on a note of sadness, almost desperation, when speaking about those who once have been part of the life in Christ and have then forsaken the faith. How could that happen? Was it perhaps in order to escape persecution, or might they have been seduced by the voices of “another gospel?”

“It is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt” (Hebrews 6:4-6, NRSV).

It is indeed sad to see people fall away who seemed to have been seriously committed to the Christian faith and life. The backsliders referred to in the above passage apparently were people who had tasted the real thing; who had been touched by the Spirit of God. They were not like so many people today, who slide in and out of church membership with the greatest of ease because they have never seriously struggled with issues of faith, nor have they been made clearly aware that church membership implies discipleship and that discipleship involves spiritual discipline.

The fallen cleric has always been viewed with special fascination among the public at large, and has been a favored subject among novelists and movie producers: the bad priest, the phony evangelist, the preacher who has lost faith in his own message. A non-believing theological professor is less likely to be featured as a novel’s anti-hero, probably because expectations about their devotion to tradition tend to be lower. However, if he or she comes up with a really dramatic slogan (e.g. one that out-sensationalizes “the death of God”) the media may take notice and one might even make the cover of *TIME* Magazine.

There is a feeling of sadness in the family of God when we lose “one of our own.” By the same token, there is a sense of satisfaction when we gain a convert, particularly in the case of a celebrity, and there may be outright glee when it turns out that our detractors too can suffer from a loss of faith. A famous case in point is that sharp-witted playwright George Bernard Shaw. Toward the end of his life he made the following admission in *Too True to be Good*: “The science to which I pinned my faith is bankrupt ... Its counsels which should have established the millennium have led directly to the suicide of Europe. I believed them once. In their name I helped to destroy the faith of millions of worshipers in the temples of a thousand creeds. And now they look at me and witness the great tragedy of an atheist who has lost his faith.” I recall that elsewhere Shaw had made the assertion that “forgiveness is a beggar’s refuge; we must pay our debts”, a belief that makes his confession of spiritual bankruptcy sadder yet.

Loss of faith evokes a mixture of feelings. And somewhere in that mix of sadness and glee an ingredient is often found that we may be reluctant to recognize, namely resentment. Resentment is an enemy of spirituality and of pastoral ministry in particular, because it is anger sugarcoated with piety. The mouth speaks of divine righteousness, but the heart is filled with self-pity and self-righteousness. True, the message of the gospel is not all about sweetness and light, but it certainly is not meant to be presented with an embittered edge.

I suspect that a simmering resentment is one of the more common afflictions among those of us who serve in the pastorate. There usually are plenty of provocations! However, unless faced honestly, it will surface in often subtle forms of meanness which are in direct conflict with a caring ministry.

The temptation is particularly great when we stand behind the pulpit, protected against back-talk from the people in the pew. The C & E (Christmas and Easter) crowd tend to become easy targets for our sarcastic little darts, designed to prick consciences or raise the specter of hell, but more likely to produce resentment in return as well as a feeling on the part of the unrepentant sinners that they had been right all along about not getting too deeply involved with those churchy folk.

“Be angry, “says the Bible, “but do not sin.” (Ephesians 4:26)

FAITHFUL DIALOGUE

When I arrived in the United States in 1948 (I had been here for a brief visit during my childhood years when my parents were American citizens), the towns settled by the Dutch in the Midwest featured both Reformed and Christian Reformed churches. Only a diligent student of history would know the details about the differences that had caused the split between them. Of course, at the time of the break-up the seceding brethren obviously believed that by adding the word “Christian” to their name, the real difference had been made perfectly clear.

Even in the late 40s, when a male from the one church, possibly with marriage on his mind, would date a female from the other church, he or she might be risking an inheritance. On the whole, these Midwestern Hollanders are still not enthusiastic fans of ecumenical relations, but changes over the past fifty years have been immense nevertheless. One could think of various reasons for that. The third and fourth generation of church members hardly remember what the fight was all about and hence lack the passion to pursue the quarrels of a past era. Then there are also the factors of modern communication and mobility, which have made it increasingly difficult to preserve identity through isolation and strict indoctrination. Furthermore, there is a widespread hunger for spiritual meaning in our society, causing families to join churches where they feel nurtured without paying much attention to denominational labels.

In short, we live in an ecumenical age. Dialogue has replaced a good deal of diatribe. I have been privileged to be a participant in ecumenical and interfaith conferences on five continents. Also, the local congregation I serve has a diverse membership as far as cultural, ethnic, and denominational backgrounds are concerned. I see ecumenicity on the “top” and on the “bottom” as two quite different worlds. In the worshipping congregation ecumenicity is happening almost spontaneously among people who by and large have little idea of what the dialoguers are talking about. Few ecumenical documents are ever studied on the local level, where discussions about the members’ different traditions usually take place in the form of sharing and rarely take the form of a dispute.

The “official” dialogues are a quite different matter. Years of intense study and debate are conducted before a document on a doctrinal issue or a formula of agreement can be adopted. There is movement toward greater consensus in certain areas, but many theological questions (which in some cases have a historical base) remain unresolved.

The critics of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue have always feared that it would lead churches along the path of unity at the cost of theological integrity – a consensus at all cost. They see the specter of religious syncretism and theological relativism. To counter such notions, the

representatives of ecumenical organizations have introduced the term “faithful dialogue,” maintaining that it involves an encounter between often conflicting confessional positions and truth claims which the participants are prepared to confront in an atmosphere of free and open exchange.

Looking back at an experience span of about half a century, who has turned out to be right? I would say: both. The dialogue movement has produced internal dynamics that are not always in sync with each other. Many believers across the globe are engaged in serious and faithful dialogue. Others are advocating radical and relativistic positions in the name of dialogue.

For instance, the Anglican cleric Marcus Braybrooke, in his book *Time to Meet* approvingly cites the 1988 declaration by the Lambeth Conference of Anglican bishops, which states that “dialogue does not require people to relinquish or alter their beliefs before entering into it: on the contrary, genuine dialogue demands that each partner brings to it the fullness of themselves and the tradition in which they stand.” However, Braybrooke leaves no doubt that, whatever views one might have held entering the dialogue, he hopes that enlightened participants will end up sharing his conviction that all religions are mere windows on the one ultimate Reality and that it is no use arguing which window offers the better view. That stance is illustrative of conclusions reached by a number of prominent dialoguers, some of whom occupy positions of power in ecumenical organizations.

As I see it, movements tend to be turned into establishments. They become institutions, hiring staff (including, of course, fundraisers). They develop budgets and build office complexes. Internal politics (turf questions!) eventually take over, as hostility toward dissenters grows at the same time that control increasingly comes to rest in an elite inner circle of people who set the agenda. The following joke used to do the rounds in Israel: “What is the difference between a monologue and a dialogue? A monologue is when one person talks to himself. A dialogue is when two people talk to themselves.” Well, sometimes it is a small group of like minded souls talking to themselves, but that’s a farcical and unfaithful version of dialogue.

There must be room around the dialogue table for those who challenge tradition. By the same token, defenders of historic faith positions must never be silenced. Of course, in order to have dialogue, all must come not just to lecture, but to listen with open minds and hearts.

I remain strongly in favor of dialogue – as a perpetually reforming movement. Christ prayed for the unity of his people (John 17). We must practice it as the Spirit leads us.

XXVI

CHURCHCRAFT

The Church (with capital C) is where Christ is. “I will send my Spirit,” Jesus had promised his disciples; “I will build my Church.” We build business enterprises, organize labor unions, establish political parties and form clubs. But the Church is Christ’s creation. “Where two or three are together in my Name, I will be in their midst.” A few people, gathered perhaps in someone’s living room, plus his presence in the Spirit and pronto, there’s the Church!

It is all so basic and so mysteriously simple. Yet, it seems to take a constant intervention of divine grace for us to get the point. Christ uses people who are called to various ministries in order to fulfill his mission in the world, but he never meant for an ecclesiastical hierarchy to replace him at the center of church life. The saying “the Church is where the Bishop is” therefore reflected a distortion of the true nature of the Church. Or, take buildings and programs. They can serve as instruments of the Spirit and conduits of divine grace, but they do not *constitute* the Church.

When the power source in a community is short-circuited, the neighborhood is thrown into darkness and confusion. The history of the Christian Church offers a myriad of examples of power failures. Christians cut themselves off from the Source; Christ is replaced by churchcraft.

We pastors pick up so many tricks of the trade – from the commercial sector, from the advertising industry, from the realm of entertainment, etc. The problem, however, is not techniques learned from the world around us. Rather, the problem arises when we adopt a technological mind-set and begin to depend more on churchcraft than on the presence of the living Christ. Many will be impressed with our expertise and they may provide the resources to turn the enterprise into a huge success. But it can all so easily become like SOMA in Huxley’s *Brave New World*, a “Christianity without tears” – a gospel without the cross.

Churchcraft comes in many forms and varieties. During the 1950’s there was a good deal of talk about the church’s “edifice complex.” Congregations were following the population exodus from city to suburb. Church life flourished. Joining was the thing to do. Large new facilities became like symbols of an affluent society.

During the 1960s those looking for renewal of congregational life were groping for words to express their dismay at what they saw as ecclesiastical introversion, rigidly devoted to outmoded structures that stood in the way of being “Church for the world.” “God’s frozen people” and “morphological fundamentalism” are some of the phrases that come to mind.

Today’s megachurches are being portrayed as the true promise of the future. They are located on “campuses,” built like convention centers. How shall we respond to all this? Shall we insist that small is beautiful? I consider myself somewhat of an expert on small and struggling

churches. It is the only kind I have ever been asked to serve. From my experience, I can state with certainty that smallness is not necessarily a sign of saintliness, nor of true service to Christ.

Small churches tend to have their own preoccupations. They often suffer from a survival mentality which, according to the laws of the Spirit, will perhaps slowly, but surely, lead to death. In many cases it also encourages a manipulative approach to people, treating them like objects. During the monthly board meeting another dismal financial report is presented. A deacon solemnly declares that “we need more people,” and all around the table heads nod in assent. The focus is no longer on persons, but on “contributors,” prospects to fill empty pews and offering plates. We need people! The real questions, like “what do people need?” or “how can we respond to the needs of our neighbors?” are not being raised.

Conclusion: When dealing with the question of churchcraft, size is not the issue at all: the rule of the Lord Jesus through the Spirit is.

XXVII

BUREAUCRACY

I have come to view bureaucracies as danger zones, both for the soul and for society. I don't mean to imply that the people who work in that zone will *ipso facto* pose a danger either to themselves or to others. It just means that one should proceed with caution.

The December 29, 1996, issue of the *New York Times Magazine* was devoted to short feature articles on noteworthy individuals who had died during the preceding year. One was the story of a Washington, D.C., civil servant of considerable achievement who had made no secret of his dislike of the designation "bureaucrat." I have always been inclined to wear that badge with a certain tongue-in-cheek pride. The church bureaucracy is a field full of boobytraps, but someone has to do it, and in that case, I thought, it might just as well be me. Still today, I count some of the colleagues I worked with among the most conscientious and creative people I have known.

Nevertheless, it is an environment in which one must struggle extra hard to maintain one's selfhood, and many just don't make it, even though in administrative terms they may be considered quite strong and successful. Bureaucracies, it seems to me, develop their own internal dynamics, their own ethos if you will, and it makes little difference whether one is talking about a political bureaucracy, an educational bureaucracy, or an ecclesiastical bureaucracy. Nor is it really significant whether one is looking at a capitalist society, a socialist society, or something in between. The bureaucratic mindset tends to come with the territory. Resistance to it requires that one possesses a touch of the subversive spirit. And in a bureaucracy that is a truly dangerous way of living.

Bureaucracies expanded at a rapid pace during the post-World War II era, both in society at large and in the churches. The Interchurch Center, sometimes referred to as the "God Box," at 475 Riverside Drive in New York City, was built during the upbeat Eisenhower years. Like the Tower of Babel, it came to represent great spiritual aspirations gone awry.

The vision behind "475" was the development of a creative ecumenicity through the regular interaction between denominational leaders. Soon a slogan could be heard in the churches, however, indicating a less noble perception on the local level: "There isn't a person alive who hasn't received mail from "475." And indeed, life at the Interchurch Center had much to do with mailings and meetings.

To me it increasingly seemed an ecumenicity with a cubby hole mentality. The place was as busy as a beehive, as we traveled up and down the elevators attending meetings in look-a-like box-shaped offices, after which we sat down to exchange follow-up memos. Instead of creative interaction, I observed a growing trend toward homogenization of thought and language, resulting in less and less genuine communication with our constituents. The latter eventually

struck back by voting to move many of their staff to the hinterlands, in the hope that closer proximity to the membership might produce greater sensitivity to their views of what the church should be and do.

To what extent does geography affect the bureaucratic mentality? I really don't know, but I am inclined to put a little more trust in chronology. As a rule (with ample room for exceptions) I would say that pastors who assume administrative positions should expect to return to the local parish after a decade or so. The phrase "never again" has become identified with the Jewish response to the Holocaust. However, I heard very similar language used among some of my colleagues who were determined never again to descend to the level of a local parish.

Jesus protested against those who would lay heavy burdens on others which they were not willing to bear themselves (Matthew 23). Today, too many mailings from on high lay upon local churches the burden of ever heavier assessments in order to save what? The status quo of the establishment?

Church executives, like the poor, will always be with us. I wouldn't call them a necessary evil, because some of them fulfill functions that are absolutely necessary to do good. As persons who serve in a danger zone, however, they do need our special prayers.

XXVIII

DENOMINATIONALISM

In recent decades non-denominational churches have been in the ascendancy, while traditional denominations find themselves in a state of decline. According to *USA Today* (Jan. 23, 1997), quoting the widely read and highly respected church consultant Lyle Schaller, there are now many more independent congregations in our country than Southern Baptist and Roman Catholic churches combined. Today large numbers of people pay more attention to brand name and label when buying a car or sneakers than they do to denominational identification when choosing a church. That's a fact of life with which most pastors are all too familiar.

Does this mean that denominations are a dying breed? In some cases, perhaps. It should, however, be kept in mind that institutional demises are usually a long and drawn-out affair. First of all, churches have come up with at least as many artificial life support systems as the medical profession has. But also, even denominations that have strayed far from their rich heritage, still embody elements of traditional faith that keep on fermenting the new wine of renewal.

In a way one could say that the movement toward non-denominationalism is one of the most dramatic expressions of ecumenism in our day. For quite understandable reasons, however, church leaders, who in many cases have been the loudest advocates of unity across denominational lines, are not inclined to look at it that way. Frankly, they do have a point, because the growth of independent-ecumenical local bodies could signal the fragmentation of the Body of Christ.

Some of the counter-measures taken, however, strike me as patently counter-productive. For instance, some people talk plaintively about the principle of "connectionalism," correctly pointing out that as a denomination we are like a family of congregations sharing one another's burdens. In practice, however, that often comes to mean that the hierarchical "Daddy" knows best what is good for everyone, and if the local folk fail to share burdens voluntarily, they must be forced to do so. Hence the growing movement to rely on assessments (taxes) in order to support national programs, even in cases where such an approach had been resisted on sound principle for several centuries. It seems to me that such measures will only reinforce the drift toward non-denominationalism, all the pious talk about "connectionalism" notwithstanding.

Forced every member subscriptions to the national church magazine, for example, turns the periodical into a company paper, totally subsidized and hence totally dependent. Only the willfully naive will insist that such an arrangement has no effect whatsoever on editorial policy. Rising print and mailing costs may provide some rationale for such a radical approach. However, those very same factors make it more difficult than ever for dissenting voices to disseminate their views. The stifling of opinion, even indirectly, does not a healthy and happy family make.

“Mainliners” (like myself) may see little reason to celebrate the trend toward non-denominationalism, but there is .it seems to me good reason for us to recognize the fact that, to some extent, such movements are a reaction against some of our own misguided practices. The principle of “connectionalism” has much to recommend itself. I believe that my own ministry has benefited from denominational support systems. By the same token, I do not at all lament the end of the era of denominational chauvinism. The fact that my ministry is shaped by the Reformed theological tradition does not mean that I feel called to cultivate sterling “Calvinists,” in the mode of a 16th century world.

The non-denominational trend is also a reflection of our contemporary culture and the entrepreneurial spirit so predominant in the business world today. Will the movement eventually collapse because of its own internal weaknesses? Perhaps. History does sometimes move in wild pendulum swings. In the meantime, I’m inclined to take the wise advice of Gamaliel who, in response to the early church’s somewhat entrepreneurial approaches, remarked: –if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail; but if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them –in that case you may even be found fighting against God” (Acts 5:38-39).

Finally, there is good news! Despite the ups and downs of ecclesiastical structures, the Church of Jesus Christ is alive and well. As our Lord promised, the gates of hell have not prevailed against THE Church. The survival of the Jewish people and the survival of the Church are two of the great miracles in history. In spite of everything, the God of the covenant has remained true to God’s Word.

XXIXI

CHURCHLY MANNERS

“He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul”

Psalm 23:2

“In quietness and trust shall be your strength”

Isaiah 30:15

“Be still and know that I am God”

Psalm 46:10

For the spiritual life to be sustained or restored, we need moments of stillness, the quiet seasons for reflection, time for the gracious gesture in the midst of the busyness of daily existence. It is beside the still waters that our souls are opened to God, the self and the neighbor. According to an oriental saying, “A man does not see himself in running water, but in still water.”

The frenzied life is not good for the nurturing of faith or the fruits thereof. When, because of busyness, we lose touch with God, friendship with those around us will be affected as well. Frenzy can introduce an element of philistinism into our lives or, worse yet, lead to violence. In church life an erosion of the spirituality of grace and graciousness will soon follow.

These thoughts crossed my mind as I was pondering the juxtaposition of two incidents in my life: one during the early days of my ministry and the other one about three years ago.

In June 1964, *The Pulpit* published a sermon I had preached on the topic “After the Fall, What?” In a whim I sent a copy of the article to Arthur Miller, whose play, *After the Fall*, was so obviously based on his relationship with Marilyn Monroe (“Hollywood’s hottest property”). I had been moved by a statement she had made in a *LIFE Magazine* interview shortly before her death. “I don’t look at myself as a commodity,” she had said, “but I’m sure a lot of people have.” Indeed, and till this day still do!

To my surprise I received a card from the playwright, dated December 7, 1964, saying, “Please forgive the delay in acknowledging your letter – I’ve been at work.” Then followed a few brief comments in response to the article. I had not expected such a show of kindness and encouragement from a famous author to a young and somewhat brash preacher.

The other incident occurred a few years ago when a mid-Western pastor was elected to a one-year term as President of my denomination's General Synod. I did not know him personally, but read somewhere that he had been presented to the solemn assembly by one of his best friends who also had been a colleague of mine in the church bureaucracy. Again in a whim, I sent our new President a copy of my book on the Kingdom of God with a note wishing him well. It was meant as a gesture of goodwill from a member of the "old guard." That communication was never acknowledged.

Is there a moral to this story? Well, for one, it confirmed my conviction that Christians who only associate with other Christians may deprive themselves – socially, culturally and spiritually. In my life the Lord has sent some wonderful angels from the secular realm for me to entertain unawares. The kindness and creativity of people not belonging to "the fold" have greatly enriched my ministry.

Secondly, I see in the second incident another danger sign that pastors, pressed to do too many things, will simply succumb to the busyness of clerical demands, leading to a mediocrity which may pose a greater threat to the church than heresy. Arthur Miller had been at work in the quietness of his Roxbury, Connecticut farm house. For many pastors opportunities to retreat to the still waters are all too rare. Souls that are not regularly restored will be starved and drained of spiritual vitality. They may also be drained of sensitivity.

THE PAGAN IMPULSE

We are all pagans at heart. Scratch a Christian soul and just below the surface you will find the smoldering fires of our pagan drives. Paganism is the religion that comes to us naturally; it wells up from the depth of being. There is no need for a voice from beyond. The gods, nature and the human heart all blend together in eternal harmony. There is no revelation, just what the philosopher Henri Bergson called the *élan vital*, the onrushing force throughout creation striving for an ever purer and more rarified freedom.

The human soul longs for salvation, for intuitive powers to penetrate into the essence of things, for unbridled liberty and Dionysian ecstasies, for a taste of immortality: in short, for self-transcendence. Paganism, it should be emphasized, is not the same as primitivism. The great Goethe surely did not have such a notion in mind when he referred to himself as a pagan. Paganism is at heart a metaphysic, a world view, a belief system. It takes on many faces and forms, some crude and cruel, others sophisticated and spiritually seductive.

When Hitler, with his deep hatred for Jews and the God of the Hebrews, turned to ancient Germanic myths for inspiration, he came up with the neo-pagan ideology of "*Blut und Boden.*" The life force was now sought in the bloodstream of a pure race and in the sacredness of the nation's soil. "Deutschland, Deutschland Über alles!" Evil forces of death and destruction were unleashed with disastrous consequences for millions of people.

By contrast, a more attractive version of the free spirit can be found in the writings of Nikos Kazantzakis and particularly in the figure of Zorba. The author himself did not exactly live the Zorba life. By temperament he was shy and inclined toward the ascetic life. But in his soul there was a burning fire, a deep passion, an ongoing struggle between flesh and spirit. Kazantzakis dreamed of harmonizing those "pre-human dark and lustrous powers" through the transmutation of matter into spirit. He tried many roads to salvation until he received the ultimate vision on Athos, the holy mountain of Greece.

Nikos Kazantzakis was passionately interested in what Heidegger called "the life world." He despised academic jargon, those abstract ideas which "cannot satisfy the flesh-eating spirit." At best the thinkers in the academy would be able to help him with language and categories with which to express the journey of the human soul toward oneness with the ALL, which is called "God."

Such ideas have floated about throughout "Christian" history. They form the neo-pagan core of much what is today proclaimed as the New Age message. I am the universe and the universe is God! There is a powerful dynamic at work in such a search for self-discovery and self-transcendence through immersion in the great universal Spirit.

The Bible, on the other hand, confronts us with an entirely different world view and belief system, namely the divine-human encounter, the experience of being *addressed*, called to accountability, confession and obedience to divine commandments. That's the strange new world of biblical revelation, which does not well up from the human heart, but is entered into through an experience of confrontation, repentance, and transformation.

One could say that the biblical revelation, in its deepest intentions, puts the brakes on the tumultuous forces within the human soul, while at the same time promising freedom through subjection to the divine will. "God desires our independence," wrote Dag Hammarskjöld in his diary *Markings*, "which we attain when, ceasing to strive for it ourselves, we 'fall back into God.'" From Freud's point of view, such a surrender to "the beyond in our midst" must be considered a sign of immaturity. It is at such crossroads of the spirit that pen-ultimate decisions are made.

The great temptation for pastors and their parishioners has always been to succumb to the spirit of the age. An extreme example can be found in the First Baptist Church of Evanston, Illinois, where a "Christianity for the Modern Pagan" is being offered as a way to liberation. The word "Baptist" in the name has no longer anything to do with baptism as a dying in Christ and being raised through the power of the resurrection. Redemption is no longer related to sin, but rather to the healing of poor souls who lack a healthy self-esteem.

Not all pagan trends lead us straight into neo-Nazism or nihilism. But we better watch out, especially when the gods we worship are either the state or the self. To deification (the making of gods) there is no end, but it is a dangerous game to play. The gods we create can kill us.

XXXI

DEMONS

Angels appear to be one of the more popular topics in our day. Angels here, angels there, angels angels everywhere. We like the idea of being surrounded by those ever present rescuers. But what about the demons, those “fallen angels” in our midst? What about the dark forces within that made the Apostle Paul feel so wretched and caused him to wonder what in the world got into him when he did some of the things he did? “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” (Romans 7:15).

In his poem “Desert Places” Robert Frost wrote:

“They cannot scare me with their empty spaces between stars--on stars where no human race is. I have it in me so much nearer home to scare myself with my own desert places.”

I read the other day how the well known Picasso biographer John Richardson described one of his friends as “a devil with an angelic streak, and the devil always won.” That, it seems to me, pretty well describes most of us. God, says the Psalmist, created us “a little lower than the angels”(Psalm 8:15). But the image of God in us has become gravely marred and the angelic side of human nature can have a hard time showing itself.

I have practiced Christian ministry with very few illusions about human nature. I must confess that I find it hard to understand how anyone can engage in honest introspection or be at all aware of what is going on in the world around us, and remain optimistic about the basic goodness of the human race. In recent history, the Holocaust has brought us face to face with what Paul Tillich called the realm of “the Demonic”. Are those horrors to be understood in terms of certain characteristics inherent in the German people? Or do they reveal the ever present potentials of unspeakable evil that humans are quite capable and willing to inflict upon others toward whom they bear an animus?

The Holocaust is an event of awesome historical dimensions. But it all starts in those scary desert places of the soul, in the dark recesses of the human heart. As I see it, demons keep on hovering around our Holocaust memories. Their effect can be observed in the behavior of the deniers, the revisionists who write heavily footnoted works telling the world that it never happened. I suspect their presence in the motives of the careerists who have infiltrated the circles of genuine concerned Holocaust researchers. I don't trust some of those “experts” who pontificate on university campuses and parade around the ballrooms of hotels where Shoah seminars are held. It can be such a short step from careerism to an opportunism that will use anything or anyone for selfish purposes. And what about the cynical notion that “there is no business like Shoah business?” I was dumbfounded when I first heard that phrase used by a rabbi in Los Angeles who was venting his anger and frustration at the way the Holocaust is sometimes exploited for fundraising purposes.

Finally, I see a danger in us focusing too much on the big devils that make the history books, forgetting about all those clever little demons hovering around our churches. For example, if it is true that Satan knows how to quote scripture, how might he display his skills? I could see him pick a person of pious disposition who is inordinately proud to be called a Bible-believing Christian and use that individual as an instrument for his nefarious schemes. In one of the parishes I served there was this woman, Lois, a Bible-toting text-quoting graduate of a well-known Christian institution, who was always on the warpath slaying enemies in the name of a wrathful God. She was a stocky built woman, whose starched facial muscles and metallic voice reminded me of the way movie makers like to portray female prison guards who act out on others their own inner furies.

Then I remember another Lois in another parish, somewhat similar in outward appearance, but very different in soul. She was a woman of little formal training who radiated a quiet piety and inner peace. To many people in distress she became like an angel sent from heaven. I may have practiced my ministries with few illusions about human nature. Thank God, however, I have never lost faith in the power of divine grace to bring out the best potentials in human beings.

XXXII

GLORIA MUNDI

Sic transit gloria mundi. How transitory is life; how fleeting are our shiny moments and how soon forgotten our finest achievements! The Psalmist expressed it all with almost brutal bluntness: We are like grass; today we flourish and tomorrow we fly away, blown about by the winds of time.

I think of the theological giants with whom my generation of seminarians grew up: Karl Barth, Emil Brunner, Paul Tillich, Rudolph Bultmann, Reinhold and Richard Niebuhr. Few students today remember even them, the greatest among the recent teachers of the church. Fewer yet read them.

“Time, like an ever-rolling stream, Bears all its sons away; They fly forgotten as a dream Dies at the opening day.’

And what about our pastoral endeavors? When all is said and done, what does it really add up to? Some look back at so many years spent being overworked and underpaid. Others live with regrets about having neglected their own families. In times past the parson was often seen as that special person in the community deserving of respect because of his ordained status. In today’s cultural climate the clerical collar no longer provides *ipso facto* authority, nor -for that matter- does any other kind of uniform.

When we humans look at our lives and efforts in light of the vastness of space and time, a sense of the vanity of it all might well overwhelm us. What are we but big fishes splashing about in our tiny little ponds, living on a planet that is but a speck among the galaxies?

Indeed, wrote Blaise Pascal in his *Pensées*, we are but a feeble reed, but we are a *thinking* reed. Moreover, we can reach beyond the moment as we dream the dreams of God’s Kingdom. We are, in the words of Fritz Buri, creatures endowed with *Transzendenzbezogenheit*. German theologians often have a way with such words. What in essence it means, however, is that we are response-able persons, people who can receive the message about the Holy One, Creator of the universe and Lord of history, who has entered time and reaches out to us in grace. Divine love, all love excelling, is offered us, not only asking us but also enabling us to respond.

It is such a self-understanding that empowers us to hold out in life and endure in pastoral work. There are so many elements of *gloria mundi* in the life of the church, so much mediocrity, so much preoccupation with petty things that seem far removed from the realm of the sacred. Pastors sometimes have the feeling that they are being buried under mountains of Mickey Mouse stuff.

And yet, it happens! Healing takes place. Lives are transformed. A one-time confirmation student, now a mother with grown children, or a grandfather reflecting on the transitoriness of life, sends a note saying, “You may not know it, and at the time I hardly knew it myself, but you have made a difference in my life. Through your ministry and by God’s grace, I did meet Jesus.”

When the obituary has been published and the words of eulogy have been spoken, how many will remember? Jesus will. In the story of the sheep and the goats, he warned that we might expect a bit of confusion at the gates of heaven, as some who thought they had all the right credentials hold up the line wanting to know why they have such a hard time getting in. However, the Lord has kept his own Book of Life, filled with the names of unknowns who-often unknowingly-have loved Christ by showing kindness to the least of God’s children: the sick, the hungry, the imprisoned.

So, we can relax. Whether it’s Karl Barth, Billy Graham, Pastor X in Podunk, anywhere, or that strange lady in the back pew who always mumbles during the sermon, in the economy of divine grace the books will balance out. In the end, it will all add up.

The Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed. A tiny seed is sown, but what happens in the fullness of time can be a wonder to behold.

XXXIII

BUSHKILL, PA

The church in Bushkill, Pennsylvania, has been the great post-retirement surprise of my life. To me, it is story of divine irony and grace. My wife and I entered that sanctuary for the first time on the third Sunday of Advent, 1988. We were making regular trips to the Pocono region, looking to purchase a home. That Sunday there were fourteen worshipers in attendance, half of whom joined in the singing. “Joy to the World” didn’t sound quite convincing under those conditions. All in all it was not a very uplifting experience and we left fully expecting not to return.

On October 1, 1989, I preached my first sermon in that church. Questions were being raised in the supervising regional judicatory whether the church should remain open at all. I was asked to help out for a brief interim period of six months or so. That was almost eight years ago! When a recurrence of my prostate cancer was recently discovered, I felt like reminding the Lord that I had not come to Bushkill with the idea of dying in my pastoral boots. Could I please have a little quieter post-post-retirement stage in life?

The small town of Bushkill is located along the Delaware River in the beautiful Pocono Mountains region. The word “kill” is said to be derived from an old Dutch word meaning “little stream.” Not too far way in New York State is another town named Fishkill, Animal rights advocates have demanded a name change there on grounds that the present designation sounds too offensive to fish.

Bushkill has had more serious traumas to endure. In the 1960s, during the Johnson administration, Congress voted to construct a huge dam in the Delaware River. Large plots of land were confiscated, numerous homes, including the famous guest houses for tourists, were destroyed. The population declined and an already struggling church was virtually devastated. In the end, the dam was never built; the sanctuary is not buried under 60 feet of water as originally planned, and around the national park which the government has created, new developments have emerged. Could a remnant suffering from fatigue, if not defeatism, recapture the vision that God can create life out of death, opportunity out of crisis?

For me the ministry in Bushkill has been a rich experience. The church has developed into a fellowship of people with diverse racial, ethnic and denominational backgrounds. For the first time in decades they look forward to calling a full time pastor.

As I reflect on all this, two thoughts in particular come to mind. First, it is so important to remain open to the surprises the Lord my have in store for us, no matter how old one may be. Any moment can become a *kairos* moment, a time of decision and opportunity. The God of the

Bible, who is a God of new beginnings, is no respecter of age. After twenty years of administrative work in Manhattan and constant travel, I once again became part of a *koinonia*, a fellowship of pilgrims in pursuit of the divine promise: “Behold, I will make all things new” (Revelation 21).

Secondly, I felt I had an almost unfair advantage vis-à-vis my younger colleagues. Never did the church and I put one word in writing. It has been an eight year informal arrangement. That gives one a great measure of freedom (backed up by my very modest pension). It was clearly understood from the very beginning that I would devote several days a week to study and writing. Hence, certain things would simply be left undone, unless lay leadership was ready to take over. In short, I lived relatively free from the constant pressures that so many clergy must endure, often depriving them of times to reflect, to take sermon preparation seriously, even to pray and—an essential not to be forgotten—have time to play.

Many a modern pastor’s job description seems inimical to the spiritual life. I often wonder whether the self-imposed limitations in my situation yielded unforeseen blessings for both me and the congregation. Telling pastors to go and do likewise or to take it a little easier is obviously not the answer. Frankly, I’m not sure what the answer is. But I *am* sure that we must wrestle with the question.

XXXIV

BUSHKILL, II

Mood swings are part of life. They are unfortunately (and paradoxically) aggravated at times by one's participation in church life. The preceding piece was written in the spirit of Paul's letter to the church in Philippi, a congregation that had given him great joy and of which he was very fond. Now, a month or so later, I write more in the spirit of his letter to the Galatians ("You foolish people! Why try to recapture a discredited past?"), except that in my case I am talking about the same church. Paul's concern was heresy; my concern is the danger of mediocrity undermining pastoral authority.

The incident that sparked these reflections happened on the first Sunday in Lent, which was also my last Sunday in the pulpit before departing for Denver where I was to undergo surgery in the hope that I would be back in time to conduct the Palm Sunday service. Mr. S. is among the oldest of old timers in the region. He has seen many ministers (mostly recent seminary graduates) come and go. During the service Mr. S., accompanied on the guitar by his grandson, had sung a special and quite sentimental number.

In the constant search for a way to exercise authority in a non-authoritarian fashion, I am prepared to put my critical standards on hold for a while, as long as mediocrity does not become a habit. An occasional "performance" may well be below par, but God still can be praised and the people often kindly appreciate the effort. Mr. S. was by no means a man without talent. He is a master woodworker. The trick is to know which are our best talents to offer to the Lord.

After the service our musical pair announced that they were planning another very special number for the Easter service that would bring tears to the eyes of all who did not suffer from a hardening of heart. Sorry, I said somewhat insincerely, but the Easter music has already been decided. This caused an infuriated Mr. S. to remind me that before my arrival on the scene nobody had ever stopped him from doing his thing, and that he would never again set foot in this church.

I know, this is a silly story. But isn't that precisely the stuff most church conflicts are made of? How many congregations have gone down battling issues of doctrinal importance compared with the number of parishes that have been brought low by petty infighting? Christian fellowships tend to be so fragile! Like with market cycles, what has taken years to build up can come crashing down in a matter of months.

Where is the Holy Spirit in all this? Isn't Jesus Lord? Yes, he is, but he still rules among his enemies (Psalm 2) and the opposition forces, called principalities and powers in the New Testament, are often so strong: pride, prejudice, wrong priorities, pastoral failures and frequently a lack of simple graciousness among people who profess to be children of grace.

Will Mr. S. quit? I don't know, but I do know that there have been moments when the thought of quitting the ministry has crossed my mind. Quitting the church, however, is an entirely different matter. I have to constantly remind myself that I believe One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic church. I do *not* believe *in* the church, and much less in church people. My faith is in the Lord of the Church who has promised us his presence through the Spirit. After quitting our church or our ministry, we are still confronted with the question articulated by Pilate: "What shall I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?" (Matthew 27:22). He gave his answer. Each one of us must give our own. And if we want to stick with Christ, then there is no way we can just forget about the creation of his Spirit: the Church—warts and all. We will be stuck with a communion of saints who still do a lot of sinning. That's where the "ministry of reconciliation" comes in, which is about much more than damage control. It goes to the heart of our self-conceit and our need for mutual confession. It is not easy, but on that point God does not give us a multiple choice.

FORGIVENESS

“Have you read L. Gregory Jones’ book *Embodying Forgiveness?*” asked my eldest son, who also is a pastor. “We discussed it in our monthly pastoral book reading group and I thought you may find some kinship with the author’s approach. I have an extra copy you can buy.” And so it happened that *Embodying Forgiveness* became my hospital reading.

I was indeed delighted to see the subject treated in the context of a theology of the Kingdom, a theme that runs through many of my writings over the years. I wished that I could have listened in on the discussions among those pastors. After all, who of them had ever served a church that came even close to exhibiting the kind of community Jones is calling for? The Kingdom, wrote Paul to the Christians in Corinth, is not a matter of talk, but of power. And so, according to Jones, it is with forgiveness. It is not just about words, but about a way of life.

Reading the book rekindled memories of one of the toughest and angriest periods in my life, namely when I was fired from my executive position in 1978. I felt betrayed, the “object” of a bureaucratic power play. When I was invited to a “hearing” to be held at Newark Airport, I thought the choice of locale most appropriate, convenient not only for board members who were eager to fly in and out at maximum speed, but convenient also in that there was not a single reminder around that we were part of the Church of Jesus Christ. It seemed to me that the meeting had nothing to do with truth or fairness, but had everything to do with damage control. I saw it basically as an exercise in cowardice and bureaucratic callousness to which I needed to respond with an air of contempt.

Several attempts were made by well-motivated mutual friends to bring the General Secretary, with whom I wished to have no further dealings, and me together. I brushed these efforts off as a political gesture, a handshaking session designed to silence me after I had rejected a “severance package” on the condition that I not speak out.

As I look back at that episode in my life, lying in a hospital bed with Jones’ book, I don’t feel good about some of my actions in that dispute. Mind you, I still could marshal plenty of “good reasons” to argue that I was right, but in the face of the gospel, such arguments usually don’t hold up very well. The person at whom my rage was directed died a few years ago of cancer, not too long after he too had been fired from a top ecumenical position.

As I looked at the other bed in the room, I wondered what we would say to each other as patient to patient. Might we be able to smile at the thought that in a way we really deserved each other? Dare I say that we were a sort of Bill Clinton/Dick Morris combination? I worked for him (with great loyalty, I thought) for a decade, but I wasn’t quite prepared to give up my maverick ways. We respected each other’s strengths, but in the end we didn’t have the strength to avoid a conflict that was void of redeeming features.

The first night after my return from the hospital I had a dream that really disturbed me. The pastoral search committee of the church I have been serving on a part-time basis has begun to focus on a few potential candidates. One of them, a person about whom I had received positive information which I had shared with the committee chairperson, came to visit in order to meet with various groups in the church. During one of those sessions he suddenly launched into an attack on me personally, mentioning specifically that at one time I had been dismissed from a leadership position.

I have never been one to dwell on dream details and their interpretation. Sometimes I am amazed and at other times I am amused at the strange powers of the inner psyche. In the meantime, we all sense that some deep things are going on there that have to do with out troubled lives and unresolved conflicts. And that's where forgiveness comes in! The answers do not lie within our psyches. To paraphrase St. Augustine's famous dictum: "Our psyches are haunted, until they find peace in God." That is what divine forgiveness does.

FAITH AND FUTURISM

In 1947 Malwina, who was soon to become my wife, gave me a book for my birthday, dealing with one of my favored topics at the time: how to move beyond doctrinaire socialism and capitalism by developing a “planned economy” that would preserve both freedom and justice. She inscribed the book with a French saying that had become somewhat of a motto in our relationship; *ni regret du passé. ni peur de l’avenir* – no regrets about the past, no fear for the future.

We had met shortly after World War II. Her family had survived the concentration camp Theresianstadt and returned to Holland homeless. In my family we had lost our worldly possessions when, during the final days of the war, British pilots, seeking to destroy German V2 rockets which were being launched from woods near our home, missed their target and burned down a large section of the Hague instead. The French saying was less an affirmation of a deep conviction than an expression of hope that we would make it in our journey from dark yesterdays to the unknown tomorrows awaiting us.

Over the years I have come to consider myself a “biblical futurist.” I use that phrase fully aware that dealing with the past can involve much pain and that trying to project into the future has made fools out of many an intelligent person. First, there is that seemingly inescapable law of unforeseen consequences. Politicians are perennially bumping their heads against that harsh reality, without, however, seeming to learn much from the experience. Think of social security, Medicare, or anyone of a host of bureaucratic initiatives. The original projections now look like Disneyland arithmetic.

A tragic-comical illustration of unforeseen results is the story about the World Health Organization setting out to exterminate houseflies in Borneo, because they were suspected of spreading disease. The answer? DDT, of course! The flies died and so did the gecko lizards which gobbled up their DDT infested corpses. Next in the chain reaction were the housecats who captured such geckos with great ease. The result? Rats had the run of the land, threatening the population with disease. The solution? Parachute a large number of imported cats into the region in order to restore some natural balance. Unforeseen consequences indeed!

Then there is the problem of unfulfilled prophecies, whether issued by market gurus, T.V. preachers or wise men foretelling the world that is supposed to be just around the corner. The December 24, 1995, issue of the *New York Times Magazine* offered an interesting assortment of such predictions. “By 2000,” proclaimed the popular futurist Buckminster Fuller in 1966, “amid general plenty, politics will simply fade away.” Here’s another sample: “If anything remains more or less unchanged, it will be the role of women.” So declared renowned sociologist David

Riesman in 1967. A friend of mine observed recently that a futurologist has at least one advantage over a meteorologist: the former has usually left the land of the living by the time he or she has been proven wrong.

“Biblical futurism” is expressed more in one’s life journey than in dramatic predictions offered. It fits, one might say, the Abrahamic model better than the style of sensationalist pulpsters. The story of father Abraham is quite short on hype. The man hears a summons “from above” and sets out on a great venture of faith, stubbornly pursuing the promise despite shaky empirical evidence. After all, is it realistic to expect that a childless elderly couple will become the forebears of a great nation?

In more recent years my favored motto has come from the late Pierre-Teilhard de Chardin. This paleontologist, a man with a passion to unlock the secrets of the past, referred to himself as a “pilgrim of the future.” Not a speculator, nor a prophecy preacher, but a believer whose life is shaped by a joyful expectation of the Lord’s great tomorrow.

Biblical futurism is basically a question of the vision one lives by. It is not optimistic in the sense of a pollyanna view of the world in general and human nature in particular. Rather, it remains hopeful even in the midst of hardship, believing that the God who has acted so wonderfully on behalf of a lost world in the past will not have a change of heart and hence will not forsake the works of his hands.

XXXVII

DEATH: FRIEND OR FOE?

“I’m writing a few reflections; if I finish, I finish; if I don’t finish, I don’t finish.” Those were the words of Joseph Cardinal Bernardin in an interview with the *New York Times* about one month before he died of cancer at age 68. I read his comments as I was doing some reflecting of my own while awaiting a bone and CT scan scheduled for Friday, December 13th, to see if my prostate cancer had spread.

The Cardinal was queried about his public statement that he viewed death as a friend. That’s not the kind of description of death that we are accustomed to hearing. The language of darkness strikes a more familiar note, as in the title of Harold Brodsky’s recent book: *The Wild Darkness: The Story of My Death*. Or, when the terminology of resignation is used, it tends to have a certain tone of cynicism or absurdity about it, like in Camus’ book *The Stranger*, where death is described as the surrender “to the benign indifference of the universe.

Others, like Nikos Kazantzakis, for instance, display a spirit of defiance in the face of death. Live life to the full! Burn the candle on both ends and cheat the Grim Reaper out of his spoil! In his version of the Odyssey, Kazantzakis describes the death of his hero as follows:

“The Archer has fooled you Death, he squandered all your goods, melted down all the rusts and rots of his foul flesh till they escaped you in pure spirit, and when you come, you’ll find but the trampled fires, embers, ash, and fleshly dross.”

The apostle Paul too, out of his deep belief in the resurrection of Jesus, sounds a defiant note:

“Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting?”

I Corinthians 15:55

The foe has been vanquished! Why should we be afraid? Elsewhere he too seems to welcome death as a friend:

“For me, living is Christ and dying is gain— My desire is to depart and be with Christ for that is far better.

Philippians 1:21,23.

Cardinal Bernardin was candid enough to admit that at times contemplating his approaching demise caused him profound anguish. He stated that he had been greatly helped by the Dutch priest Henri Nouwen, who for many years lived, taught and wrote in the Americas. In his book *Here and Now*, he devotes a section to the theme “preparing for death.” He writes there

about our fears and the understandable hope often expressed in the wish that it won't last too long, that one might be allowed to die of a sudden heart attack. Ironically, Nouwen actually got his wish. Shortly after his visit with Bernardin he died of a sudden heart attack during a stopover in his native the Netherlands while en route to Russia.

A quick end, preferably in our sleep, is what many of us would choose, if the choice were ours. I must confess that the thought of dying of Alzheimer's disease fills me with trepidation. The devastating impact this dreadful disease has on loved ones is more than many of us could bear. Yet, that is the burden carried by numerous families today, until death finally brings relief, often mixed with feelings of guilt.

I find it difficult to embrace death as a friend. Contemplating that "final" break in human relationships that are so precious evokes more sadness than fear in my heart. As far as my relationship to God is concerned, I have over the years found comfort and security in a deep sense of divine forgiveness. "There is no condemnation," says Paul, "for those who are in Christ Jesus." On the other hand, one can never be blasé about the sting of death, which to a large degree is the result of a bad conscience and the knowledge of judgment deserved. Yet in the end is not the Christian faith a matter of betting one's life on the mercy of God? "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more." (Romans 5:20). That's the arithmetic of divine love.

The first stanza of the British composer John Taverner's *Funeral Ikos* reflects some of my own feelings:

"Why these bitter words of the dying, O brethren, which they utter as they go hence? I am parted from my brethren. All my friends do I abandon, and go hence. But whither I go, that understand I not, neither what shall become of me yonder; only God who hath summoned me knoweth. But make commemoration of me with the song: *Alleluia*."

XXXVIII

NUMBERING OUR DAYS

“So teach us to number our days
that we may get a heart of wisdom”
Psalm 90:12

We all know that our days have a number. Death is the greatest certainty in life; it knows of no exceptions. There is a difference, however, between knowing that some day we shall die and facing death, without falling into fear and despair. The latter stance requires a special kind of “wisdom.”

Leo Tolstoy’s story “The Death of Ivan Ilyitsch” is about the distinction between an intellectual and existential knowing about death. I first read that story years ago as an assignment for a college literature course. In my report on the story I mentioned some parallels between Tolstoy’s ideas and what leading existentialist philosophers were saying about death and non-being. The professor was so impressed with those tidbits of wisdom, coming from this recent arrival from Europe, that she asked me to give a talk on the subject.

Of course, our lecturing about existentialism tends to be far more abstract than existential in nature. Frequently that is also true of our interpretations of biblical texts, stories and poems. I have meditated on the Psalmist’s plea for a wise heart as he numbers his days during many a funeral service, pointing out that he is not asking for improved counting skills, but for courage to face the truth about his own mortality. He seeks a deeper knowledge that comes, not so much from studying statistics on life expectancy, but from insight into the meaning of divine grace.

Ivan Ilyitsch had lived as a smart and rather successful conformist. He had cultivated ties with all the right people, had entered into a proper marriage, and was known as a witty, well-bred, and all around good-natured sort of chap. However, the marriage eventually turned sour and his job as a civil servant drifted into routine boredom.

And then, so very suddenly, came this terrible disease and the virtual certainty that he would soon die. Writes Tolstoy: “The example of the syllogism that he had learned in Kisseveter’s logic (Caius is a man, all men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal) had seemed to him all his life correct only as regards Caius, but not at all as regards himself. Caius certainly was mortal and it was right for him to die; but for me, little Vanya, Ivan Ilyitsch, with all my feelings and ideas--for me it’s a different matter.”

Few words in our vocabulary arouse the fear and shocked awareness of our finitude that the word “cancer” does. My funeral meditations usually concluded with words of comfort and hope for family and friends. I was particularly fond of St. Paul’s affirmation in Romans 8: “I am

convinced that neither death nor life--nor things present, nor things to come--nor anything in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” What a triumphant message that is! What a powerful witness to divine mercy and faithfulness!

But what kind of witness shall we give through the way we meet our own death? Our manner of dying should tell a good deal about what the true meaning of our life has been. Yet, death is so shrouded in the unknowable. As pastor I have been with many people in their final hours. I have read accounts of near-death experiences. Still, what do I really know about dying? Or, for that matter, about the hereafter? I have often felt a certain discomfort with folk who seem to know so much about the temperature of hell and the furniture of heaven (especially the favored music instruments).

I pray that in the end I will trust God, knowing that this can happen only if God helps me and makes it happen. One could say that facing death and its uncertainties puts us in a precarious position. That, however, is precisely the Latin word (*precarious*) from which the word prayer has been derived. I dare not predict how I will face death, but I can talk to God about it in prayer: O God, help me to hold on to the belief that your love is eternal and that not even death can separate me from that love, revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

XXXIX

COMPASSION

“What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Micah6:8

How much kindness does the Lord require of us? Or, to look at it from the human side, how much of other people’s sufferings can a person internalize and still survive? It is a question of the cost of compassion. It is also, as the Micah text suggests and as Jesus demonstrated, a question of the cost of discipleship.

There is an old Hassidic story about a rabbi who asks one of his most devoted students, “Do you love me?” “Oh yes,” replied the young man, “I love you very much.” “Then tell me,” the rabbi came back, “do you know what hurts me?” “No,” said the student, “how could I know?” “But my son,” responded the rabbi, “how can you love me if you do not know what hurts me?”

As pastor I have been in and out of many hospitals and nursing homes. During those visits I have tried to convey to the patients that God cares and that there is a fellowship of compassion called the Church whose members care too. While we pastors come and go, however, there are those colleagues of ours in the “helping professions” who stay day in and day out, dealing with difficult and sometimes desperate situations. Their compassion must at times be severely tested. I had ample opportunity to reflect on that during a recent hospital stay.

But then, when is compassion not tested? It certainly was in Jesus’ case. He came to reveal the God of Israel, our Father in heaven, whom the Bible frequently describes as “full of compassion.” The New Testament tells us repeatedly that Jesus was “moved by compassion,” especially for sick people, sinners and various outcasts. In the end it cost him his life.

To follow the Lord in that kind of compassion is one of the most difficult aspects of discipleship. Few of us succeed. A mother Teresa is an almost freak phenomenon, much admired, but also viewed with amazement. Multitudes of people may see her as a model of true Christianity, but many of those also regard her as a rare exception.

The religious philosopher Nicolas Berdyaev was a man of burning passion, which, according to his own testimony did not translate into compassion. He frankly admitted in his autobiography, *Dream and Reality*, that he had done little to put his compassion to use in life and to alleviate the sufferings of others.

In one of his letters from prison Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote that we must form our estimate of people less from their achievements and failures, and more from their sufferings. He

had chosen to become an accomplice in a plot to assassinate Hitler, and paid for it with his life. Did he see his involvement in that failed venture as an act of compassion in the face of untold suffering brought about by a psychopath?

It is not always so simple to figure out how the Lord wants us to fulfill the requirement of kindness. Furthermore, entering into other people's sufferings can be emotionally draining. We live busy lives and sometimes we are preoccupied with our own problems and pains. How much time and energy is left to deal with the troubles of others? Søren Kierkegaard, also a man of great passion, turned that question around. How can we be healed of our fragmented existence without being sensitive to the hurts of others? "For the deadly disease of "busyness," he wrote in *Purity of Heart*, "there is no medicine so specific as the pondering of the hard path of the true sufferer and as a fellow human being sharing with him in the common lot of suffering."

Pondering is not enough. We must act. Leo Tolstoy's final novel, *Resurrection*, is the story of Katusha, a prostitute falsely accused of murder, and Nekhludov, a Russian prince who had been the first to seduce her at an early age. Nekhludov's journey of compassion and toward resurrection led him along the road to Siberia, where he followed Katusha and a group of other prisoners into exile. Unfortunately, Tolstoy did not believe that the church as he knew it, could serve as a body of compassion in a broken world.

Lately, liberation theology has put great emphasis on the need for solidarity with the poor and oppressed. I suspect that the more successful one's book on the subject becomes in the marketplace, the harder it may be to put such solidarity into practice. Professorships and lectureships may well get in the way. The compassionate life, wrote Henri Nouwen, is "the life of downward mobility." He left Yale and the lecture circuit, spending the final years of his life ministering to the mentally ill.

Suffering and atrocities are all around us. Listening to the nightly newscasts can be a spirit-numbing experience, even to the point of paralysis. What difference can one person make? The important thing to remember is that Christ does not call us to save the world. He came to do that himself. Secondly, we need to remember that compassion is supposed to be nurtured in churches where mutual acceptance and caring are practiced. Where the brother or sister in Christ is not recognized as such, the needy neighbors - be they next door or across an ocean - will receive little sympathy beyond the fleeting sentiment: "Isn't that too bad."

If people were to be polled on their opinion as to what characterizes the church in their neighborhood, how many would mention the idea of a fellowship of compassion? That question should haunt us till the day when the kingdom of heaven has arrived.

XL

PRAYER

I have never prayed for a parking space. I have heard from people who have and - they claim - quite successfully so. For me, the whole issue of the power of prayer is so enshrouded in mystery that I have little desire to engage in disputes about what can or cannot be accomplished through prayer. I just know that I cannot pray that kind of prayer.

The apostle Paul comforts us with the thought that when “we do not know how we ought to pray, the Spirit himself pleads with God for us in groans that words cannot express” (Romans 8:26). That’s an amazing message! When we are at a loss for words, the Spirit sometimes will intervene, carrying the groans and sighs of our hearts (and of humanity!) before the throne of grace. Whether that includes our impatient groanings about finding a parking space, I do not know.

Jesus, at their request, taught his disciples (and, hence, us) to pray. The so called Lord’s Prayer is a prayer of the covenant community oriented in faith toward the Kingdom of God. It is not about *me*: my Father – give me – forgive me. It is about *us*, we who together await the promised new age: “Thine is the Kingdom--thy Kingdom come!”

Egocentric prayer is one of our great temptations. Awful questions, like “Lord, why me?” can so easily creep into our prayer life. I have thought about that a good deal during my recent illness. It would really be like saying, “Lord, if you needed a cancer patient, I could have suggested a much better candidate.”

The Book of Revelation (Ch.8: 4-5) talks about the prayers of God’s people, which ascend to heaven like incense and bring about dramatic changes upon the earth. Walter Wink, who has taught me a lot on these matters, says that history belongs to the intercessors, “who believe the future into being.” Effective prayer presupposes belief in divine miracles.

There is great comfort, especially during times of crisis, in sensing that one is surrounded by the prayers of God’s people. For years I have been inclined to write off talk among some of my friends about “prayer warriors.” I no longer do so, however. There is a cosmic spiritual battle going on (Ephesians 6:12) and through prayer the people of God participate in it. For three long weeks Daniel prayed fervently to the Lord, fasting and even neglecting to comb his hair thinking that God did not hear, until the angel Gabriel explained: “Daniel, don’t be afraid. God has heard your prayers ever since the first day you decided to humble yourself—. The angel prince of the kingdom of Persia opposed me for twenty one days.” (Ch. 10:12 . Good News Bible). There are opposition forces to be overcome!

Sometimes our desire to be answered in our own way becomes a point of resistance rather than surrender. C. S. Lewis wrote *A Grief Observed* in moments of deep anguish after the death of his wife. He bombarded God with questions, but received no answer-- till he realized that the Lord was sending him a special sort of "No answer." It was not the closed door kind of "No answer," but a quiet compassionate inner assurance that the Lord of the universe who loves us has his ways which we do not always fully understand.

We pastors utter many prayers during the course of our "careers," some of them informal prayers, some stuttering prayers, some well-crafted prayers. I find comfort in the fact that Jesus taught his disciples a short prayer, because mine tend to be prayers "on the run." I don't say that proudly. As a matter of fact, I admire people who set aside regular seasons of prayer. No doubt my short prayers need a lot of supplementing by the brothers and the sisters.

I am particularly comforted by the thought that God often hears and answers prayers *in spite of us*. "Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen." (Ephesians 3:20-21).