

Devotions - July 8-14, 2007
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Sunday, July 8

“Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another.” Proverbs 27:17

I had the blessing of taking a class called “Adventure Education” at Luther Seminary late this spring. Part of the class involved participating in "ropes course" activities. One of the activities involved two cables, which were about 2 feet off the ground. The cables were both connected to one tree at one end, but extended out to two different trees at the other end, creating (by my estimation) a 20° angle: a triangle with a missing end. The activity required two people to balance on the cables where they converged and to walk across the cables as far as you could go as the two cable became further apart (“spotters” would catch you when you fell). My classmate Jason and I were ready to try. We got up on our corresponding cables and grabbed hands. With our bodies facing each other we began to move slowly away from each other on our separate cables. At first we did not keep eye contact with each other and I was trying to control both my own balance as well as Jason’s. We didn’t get very far. Then we realized we needed to push against each other and lean in all our weight upon the other person. So we tried again, looking each other in the eye and trusting that we could lean in and our partner would prevent us from falling. On this second attempt, we were so successful that we were almost horizontal before we fell into the arms of our spotters.

My partner was sharpening my skills at “ropes courses” as well as teaching me a lesson: when I try to control everything and look at my journey in life as an individualistic one, I tend to fall on my face. When I am not afraid to look to God and others for help, great things happen. God wants us to live in community with one another. We teach each other, and depend on each other, we help each other grow stronger in our relationship with God: just as iron sharpens iron. Individually we may be able to do some good, but we usually struggle. But in community, holding one another up, that is where the real miracles happen.

God help us to live in community with one another so that we can depend on one another, sharpen and build our faith, and better love and serve you and our neighbor. Amen

Monday, July 9

“A gossip goes about telling secrets, but one who is trustworthy in spirit keeps a confidence.” Proverbs 11:13

When I was growing up, there was a country music variety show on television called “Hee Haw.” One of the skits on the show involved a bunch of women singing a song which included the line: “you will never catch any of us repeating gossip, so you better make sure you listen close the first time.” This skit and song, though humorous, portrayed a sad truth: we humans love to gossip and have become quite good at disguising gossip as something else.

I think in the Church we try to dress gossip up as “concern” for that person we are talking about. On occasion, I have even wondered if group prayer and “prayer chains” that have disclosed information about the object of the prayer (without that person’s consent) have fallen into the realm of gossip. My experience has been that Christians gossip no less than non-Christians, and men gossip no less than women. I have engaged in gossip on more occasions than I would like to admit, and I understand the attraction. For a moment it can make us feel a little better about ourselves or our situations; and it creates a temporary bond with those who we are sharing the gossip with. But like a dinner composed only of ice cream and cake, the good feeling only lasts while indulging. Gossiping gives us a sick feeling in our bowels afterward.

We do not earn God’s love, or our salvation, from refraining from gossip. St. Paul tells us that God’s love and salvation is a free gift (Ephesians 2:8.9). Yet, St. Paul does not hesitate to point out the wickedness of gossip (Romans 1:29). This should be no surprise, because gossip does not build the body of Christ; it works to tear it down. Gossip prevents us from our call to be of service to our neighbor, because by spreading hurtful news or rumors, it becomes a form of character assassination against the victim of our talk.

Heavenly Father, keep us firm in your love and your Word. Create in us a clean heart that gives us the courage and confidence to reach out to others in love, and help keep us from engaging in activities that prevent us from showing love to our neighbor: like gossiping. We pray this in Jesus name. Amen.

Tuesday, July 10

“Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed.” James 5:16

There is a saying among some people who are recovering from alcoholism and drug addiction, which goes; "you're only as sick as your secrets." This saying comes from knowledge that healing begins by acknowledging our wrongs and mistakes. When we verbalize those difficult issues that are in our past, we take some of their power away. In addition, when we talk to God and to another trusted person about events that may bring guilt (or other uncomfortable feelings), it helps us to realize the forgiveness that God so freely gives to us. This is why Christians in the Lutheran tradition (and other traditions as well) have maintained confession and absolution. This includes the option of private confession (one to one with a pastor). This does not mean confession must be to a pastor if one is not able (or wants) to do so; it can be made to a counselor or trusted friend. However, to avoid further problems, the person must be someone who can keep things confidential. We do not need (nor is it possible) to confess all sins, but those that trouble us in heart and mind (see *Luther's Small Catechism*). Confession, or sharing our sins and mistakes, takes us out of isolation and into community with God and our neighbor. It makes us acknowledge what we have done wrong; not to beat ourselves up with the past, but so we can be truer in our call to serve God and to more fully appreciate God's forgiveness. Our faith journey is not a solo mission, but one walked with our brothers and sisters in Christ; even to the point of sharing those unflattering aspects of ourselves with another.

God, give us courage and strength to confess and share those parts of our past that burden our conscience. Give us the faith to be confident that our sins are forgiven and your love for us is constant. We pray this in the name of the Father, and the Son (+) and the Holy Spirit.

Wednesday, July 11

“Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.”

Matthew 11:28-30

I was on a weekend retreat late this spring at an old monastery (which had been turned into a retreat center) in Wisconsin. As I went for my morning run, I realized that I had locked my keys in my car. I was frustrated because of this and for other foolish little mistakes I had recently made. Mistakes that were probably made because I had been running on a lot of self reliance lately. While I was running, the frustration built up. I passed a dairy farm which had on its premise a curious cow; with eyes darting right at me. I looked back at the cow, chastising her, "don't stare at me, I'm ticked off." The cow seemed unaffected by my comments and continued to stare. I imagined her thinking "that's not my problem; tell it to someone who cares."

When I got back from my run, feeling only slightly better, but still thinking of my bovine encounter; I remembered portions of Matthew 11:28-30. The cow had reminded me of an ox with a yoke and this in turn reminded me that when we walk with Christ our burdens will be light as compared to what they were like when we tried to carry our burdens by ourselves: even the little burdens like locking our keys in the car. This Wisconsin cow could not carry my burdens, but God could use her to remind me of one who could. The cow probably doesn't care, but Jesus does. Suddenly I saw how unimportant my mistake was in the grand scheme of things. God used a donkey to teach Balaam a lesson in the book of Numbers (22:28-35) in the Old Testament; who is to say God did not use a cow to teach me a lesson that June morning. A lesson certainly worth the \$35 paid to the locksmith.

God we give you thanks for the little lessons you teach us, and the sometimes unique and humorous ways the lesson is taught. Help us to remember there is no burden so great or so small that it can not be lightened a bit by trusting in you.

Thursday, July 12

“Then Mary said, ‘here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’” Luke 1:38

I often think of the Blessed Virgin Mary's words at the Annunciation. I can't imagine how scary it had to be for her, being a virgin, without a husband, and being told that she would give birth to the Son of God. Despite this great news, I can't help but wonder if she was secretly thinking "what are the neighbors going to think?" In those days there was more than a little gossip in store for a single unwed mother. The goal of a young Jewish girl at that time was certainly not to be a single mother. But Joseph remained by her side. Then, shortly after our Lord was born to Mary, she was told that a sword would pierce her own soul (Luke 1:35: this is usually believed to refer to the time that Mary was at the foot of the cross in John 19:26-27). I can't help but wonder if Mary knew the pain that she was agreeing to at the Annunciation. Yet, Scripture tells us, Mary gave birth, not to a mere mortal, but to the true Son of God: the second member of the Holy Trinity (because of this, the *Book of Concord* tells us she is rightly called the “Mother of God”). Despite the pain of being a witness to her son's crucifixion, by being open to God's plan, Mary was used by God in the giving of the greatest gift to all of mankind: Jesus Christ. I think many of us, me in particular, simply don't like pain. In fact, I like comfort. I sometimes get concerned when I believe God's plan brings me out of my “comfort zone.” Therefore, when times get difficult, and I don't want to face an uncomfortable situation, I think of a single, teenage, pregnant girl, who lived in a very dangerous time, who was simply willing to surrender and turn her will and her life over to the care of God.

Lord we see things in only a limited view, most of the time it becomes very difficult to see beyond our own immediate needs. Help us to care less about our own self preservation and more on how we can carry out your will in the World. Give us courage to say, "Let it be with me according to your will." Amen

Friday, July 13

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Psalm 22

One (of many) of my struggles with faith occurred before my grandmother died in 2004 after battling Alzheimer’s disease (she had other ailments as well). When the disease first struck, she seemed amazingly happy. Even when she couldn’t express herself, you could tell that she was experiencing joy when company would come to see her. She had a beautiful child-like quality.

Unfortunately, Alzheimer’s disease does not allow the loved ones of the victims to indulge in pious fantasies of heart-warming endings. Her last months on this earth were difficult; especially for my grandfather, parents and uncle. When the crying spells, loss of control of bodily functions and bursts of anger started, it was upsetting to see the look of intense frustration on Grandma’s face. I remember trying to pray with her, but she looked so distraught during the prayer that it made me feel as if God had abandoned her. Doubt crept in to me.

I realized that I was a wimp when I saw my faith heroes become vulnerable. I think that the “prosperity” and “feel good” theology that is so prevalent in our religious culture must have penetrated my brain because I started to think that I (and my loved ones) shouldn’t have to go through any lasting pain.

It is tempting to look at each hurdle we face as simply an opportunity for a divine miracle to show God’s glory. That is not the story of Christianity. The story of Christianity includes struggles and suffering. Bonhoeffer, Luther, St. Stephen, the early Christian martyrs and Francis of Assisi all knew suffering. Our Lord Jesus did not have the cup pass from him but endeared torture, ridicule and death by crucifixion. According to the Gospel of Mark and Matthew, Jesus himself had a moment when he wondered why his Father had abandoned him (Mark 15:34 and Matthew 27:46). Yet, sainthood is not about the dues we pay; it is about the dues that Christ has paid on our behalf.

Gracious God, we do not always understand life situations, but we ask that you always help us to remember that there is nothing that can separate us from your love through Jesus Christ: not even doubt. Amen

Saturday, July 14

“The righteous know the needs of their animal, but the mercy of the wicked is cruel.”
Proverbs 12:10.

I had once heard the saying “anyone who thinks that a cat does not have a soul has never looked into the eyes of a feline.” As a cat owner, I can’t help think that there is some truth to this (dog owners should rejoice as well: Martin Luther is rumored to be a great dog lover). My wife and I are quite bonded to our two cats. Our charcoal gray/black cat, Ebony, has diabetes. While she went into remission last year (after my wife, in her own lament, told God that he could have her house and husband, for God’s service.....I hope, but not her cat); Ebony has recently had to go back on insulin. When we take her to the veterinarian, to have blood taken from her for a glucose test; you can tell that she doesn’t understand why we are letting this hurtful process be performed on her. There is really no way we can explain that the veterinarian visit is for her own good. We can only try to show her that we love her, by scratching her and showering her with kind words. When she gets back from the vet, she is always happy to see us and usually rubs up against us to express to us, in the best way she can, that she is ours and we are hers. There is trust between Ebony and us. In the same way as the righteous knows the needs of their animals, a righteous and loving God knows our needs as well; even if we don’t always understand this journey of life. But one thing we can be sure about: The Lord is our God and we are God’s people.

Lord every animal is yours: whether in the forest or in our home. Help us to be good stewards to all animals and all your creation. Teach us to trust you so that we will always know that you are our God and we are your people. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.