

“A Legacy of Faith”

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I have a confession to make, I like mobster movies - and I mean I really like them. The “Godfather 1 & 2,” wonderful; nobody liked 3. “Donnie Brasco” - that you need to watch if you haven’t. It’s a good one and it’s not the one everybody watches. I love the “Sopranos,” and you can just name your own.

“Public Enemy.” Do you know that I have a special relationship with John Dillinger? My first church in northern Wisconsin is in the movie “Public Enemy,” because Dillinger and the FBI tried to shoot it out, and he went out the back door of the Bohemian Inn, down along the lake (which was one block from our house at that time), and he snuck almost through our backyard, with Baby Face Nelson. They got away and kept on going.

Then, my second church was in Maryville, Indiana, which is next to Crown Point, Indiana, where Jill, Hannah and I lived. That is where John Dillinger broke out of jail - so I’m waiting for what is going to happen in Des Moines.

But I have always liked mob movies. One of the reasons I get such a kick out of them is how they can compartmentalize their faith with their actions. You watch most of these mob movies, and on Saturday night or Sunday morning they are going to mass, going to church, confessing, and doing all of these good works - when they are not busy killing people. Yet they can compartmentalize, so that their faith and their actions in the rest of their world don’t seem to be a problem - and that is a problem. Compartmentalization is something that should be watched and worked on continually.

In two of my four churches, half of the churches I have served in, they had issues right before I came, and once during my time in a church we had sexual misconduct issues with staff. Over and over again, you will find in these situations, it came down to these people compartmentalizing their lives to such a degree that they could live holy lives in one part of their life, and do despicable things in the other part of their life. They could totally separate them [their lives], so they could rationalize horrible things over here [in one section of life] while still doing holy things over here [in another section of life]. The more they compartmentalized the less anchored they were to God, but the more they could rationalize the inappropriateness. It requires our “whole” selves in order to make life work.

Now I want to address the second half of that Psalm before I go any further, because that second half of the Psalm hurt you as much to hear it, as it did me to have to read it. There were a couple of things in that Psalm that I believe were caused by societal change to compartmentalize life inappropriately, even in the ancient world.

What am I speaking of? Sons are a reward and there should be a quiver full of them – well, what about the daughters? We have been, in the history of the Christian Church and before that, the people of faith, very patriarchal - and inappropriate. So when you read these [words], we have to remember the setting in the ancient world in which they were written, and we have to understand that we need to change - and even sometimes ask forgiveness for this Bible.

I remember a cartoon, many years ago. It had a mentalist. There was this guy wearing a turban, his hands over a crystal ball. Underneath the cartoon it said “mentalist.” Then, you had another guy wearing a black suit and a black tie with his hands hovering over a Bible and it said “funda- mentalist.” As if, somehow, this word was coming out of this Bible and into our heads in some sort of powerful way that you didn’t even need to open it. You just needed to carry it [the Bible] around - and if you are going to do that, get a floppy one like I have. It’s more impressive. That’s what Jimmy Swaggart used to use and that’s why I carry one; because you can flip it further too. I don’t know where that came from.

In the Presbyterian Church and in Central College, is part of the reformed tradition - which means we are continually reforming. Society changes, and we move in a trust in the Holy Spirit, not to take these old words and literally try to make them fit, but we trust in the Holy Spirit to continually reform us so we are not bound by the sins or prejudices or unjust systems that were adherent in the ancient world. We do not continue to make those things prevalent today.

We don’t “fundamental-ize” the Bible. We open it and we trust in the Holy Spirit to move us, to guide us and take us to even better, more wonderful and more loving places. That is why I can cringe while I read Psalm 127, but I can still read it, because I believe the Holy Spirit is going to take that and move it to a new place. Having said that; there is a reason why it was said.

There was power in what was said in Psalm 127, because it didn’t compartmentalize the word into one little place. The thing that was mentioned was the builders received and are blessed because God works through them; the guards in the tower guarding the city - the Holy Spirit protected and guided those guards to protect as well.

So even parents with sons and daughters, and even if you don’t have children. In the ancient world you had to have children. You had to have the huge Syrian Army to the north. You had the gigantic Babylonian army to the east and you had the incredibly powerful Egyptian army to the south. Then you had this tiny little group of people called the Israelites. Well, they needed to have as many children as they could have so they could get big enough to defend themselves.

We don’t worry about that now. There are almost too many of us. So we have to reinterpret the Scripture in a new way, to meet a new time. Please do not be offended by it; transform it. But what they were all gathering to do was, for the writer to say that God meets us in our ordinary lives. You may be extraordinary as a parent or grandparent, but there are a whole lot of us parents. It’s an ordinary thing that we do, but we can make it extraordinary. That is why parenting was mentioned with the other ordinary jobs, like being a carpenter or a guard or anything else.

When God’s Holy Spirit blesses everyone - including ordinary people doing ordinary jobs and making them extraordinary when they anchored themselves in the ground of faith, so that every part of their lives is true to the Gospel of Jesus Christ - or in this case the Hebrew Bible - then we feel the joy and the power of God working in our lives.

I have a dear friend and he is going through a really tough time right now. We got together and he said, “It is so frustrating, because I go to church and I went to a small group meeting

(at the Church he attends) and everybody else seemed to have it together but me. They all talk about how the God works through their hearts and that God is the center of their lives. I have been a Christian all of my life, but I don't feel it the way they do."

I said, "Well that's because they are probably lying."

He looked at me and said, "What?"

I said, they don't mean to lie. And, I said, some of them may be in that moment, at that time really feeling God's movement. But, if they claim that God feels really close to them every minute of every day - they are lying for Christ. No one feels that intimacy, that powerfully, every minute of every day - not even in the Bible (and these people made the final draft) did they feel God's presence every minute of every day profoundly and strong.

So you're going through a hard time, I said to my friend. I said, the way you develop a relationship with God is to anchor it in faith; but let's talk about what it means to be "anchored in faith." I didn't say "anchored in faith" on Friday. I just said it because it was the Central College's song - but I said something like it.

I said there are a few things that we do as people of faith, and one of those is - we practice. I was an awful basketball player because I didn't practice. Everyone else grew and I didn't. I couldn't control that I never got beyond 5'9", but I could control the fact that I didn't practice as much as I should have. So I went on and did other things that I did practice a little bit more. But, if you have ever been an athlete, you know you can't just get out there and run a marathon without practicing.

Why do you expect you can be a strong person of faith without practicing, either? So I said to my friend, "What do you do to practice your faith? You need to start. It's in the moments when you have the least amount of time [that you need to practice]."

Martin Luther used to say, "You need to pray eight hours a day, and if you are busy you need to pray 16 hours." It is that important. He was exaggerating for emphasis, but the key is to anchor one's self in the Gospel through constant and vigilant relationship with God. I know you are busy. So am I. So, sometimes it doesn't mean sitting down with a devotional book and your Bible, and reading for an hour a day, I can't do that and I get paid to do it.

It means inviting God in - remembering to talk about your day and how God will bless it, while you are brushing your teeth in the morning. It means what I do as I drive to work when I start feeling the anger of someone going 20 miles an hour under the speed limit in the fast lane on the I-235. (Remember I'm preaching it. I don't have to live it - and don't ask Jill about my road rage experiences.)

But in that moment you catch yourself getting really upset, just say "Stop," and - if you remember to say - "God, calm me," it's amazing how many times just saying the word "God" in that moment - in a nice way - that brings down the anxiety level. It makes you set and anchored again.

There are so many times throughout the day when you are walking through [the office] and already thinking about the sixth thing on your list - How many times I have passed Staci

and Joan in the office and barely grunted hello, and had to turn around and come back and stick my head around the corner and say, “Good morning,” and talk a minute? It’s because they are important - and more important than probably 9 of the 10 things on my list that are already late.

When you go to work or class, or [wherever] you walk in, you represent Jesus Christ wherever you go. You don’t have to have “Reverend” behind your name in order to represent Christ to the world. And, we do not do it in grandiose ways or in sermonizing, we do it in little things that anchor us.

A world is made by a million tiny moments of remembering to bring love, hope and faith to your day and to the people around you. I agonize over all of the times where I wasn’t anchored, and I brought anger and anxiety and frustration to a meeting or to my family. I can’t tell you how many times I “brought it home,” and now that Hannah isn’t around, I wish I could have so many of those back - when I just wasn’t there even when I was there.

Spiritual moments missed. You don’t have to be hit by lightning. In fact, I think Martin Luther and maybe one or two other people can claim they have had this religious moment when they were horrible and then God spoke to them. That isn’t my experience, and I’m willing to be bet for most of you it isn’t yours. God bless those people that get hit by it and are just changed and transformed immediately - I’m jealous.

That isn’t the only means of having spiritual enlightenment. For most of us it is like running a marathon. It means tying your shoes at 5:30 in the morning and getting out on that road, even if you’re tired – and you can’t have coffee before you run. It means doing it when you don’t feel like it. I love Mary Decker Sweeney. She was in the Olympics and was a mile runner. One time she was interviewed, and when asked if she really loved running, she said, “No.” Then [she was asked], “How can you do it for a living?” And she said, “I like how I feel when I’m finished running.”

Often that is the faith. In the moment that you are doing it, it seems like work dragging your rear end here on Sunday morning, when you just don’t feel like it. Being out and coming on a Wednesday night, because the kids are dragging you along. Yet, it’s how you feel when you are done that anchors you.

I love that passage from Romans 8:28 that says: *For all things work together for good, for those that love God.* It is the word “together” when you say it over and over (so I could remember it with all of you looking at me); “together” seems to be the most important word. To be anchored in the faith means to do it “together.”

I was a runner in high school, because they wouldn’t let me play basketball past ninth grade, and if I had to run in the summer (we lived in my family’s cabin in the summer in Minnesota, and it was hard because I had no one to run with), I didn’t do it as well. I ran so much better when we went home and I was running with the guys on my team, because we dragged each other out of bed - because Paul Brandt was not going to run an extra mile than I would run. So, I would get up and meet him there, and grumble all morning, while we prepared and practiced.

I know people always say, “I [they] feel God in nature.” So do I. But that isn’t the only place you find God. “I [they] really like just sitting home with a cup of coffee on Sunday morning and I feel God in my life then.” Well, so do I. But you can do that on Saturday morning or Friday night.

Sunday morning you have to be here, because we live it [our faith] in community where we are accountable to each other - where we push each other. Together you can do a little bit, but when we are all together in the faith - anchored as one in the body of Christ - we can do great things. We *do* great things. Every one [addressing the choir] of you has a gorgeous voice up here; but listen to you together. Oh, my gosh! It’s wonderful. You are so much better together than you could be alone.

That is the same thing that happens in the Church. We are anchored here. That is why Christ calls us together here. We don’t compartmentalize our lives. It isn’t just a little bit here and I could be different here. We feel the faith in God through Jesus Christ when everything, from brushing our teeth, to meeting someone in our day, to being in worship, is where we find God.

Bless each other, love each other; and, forgive ourselves and try again, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.