



# Clerg-E



An E-Zine for Ministers – October 2007

## Lead the Way

By Bass Mitchell

I do not know how funerals are conducted in your part of the world, but in the South (USA) we have some, how shall I say, different customs. For one thing, when the cars are going to the burial site, we have on our car headlights and many of the other cars and trucks we meet pull off the road and stop, a show of respect, of communal mourning. I always thought that was kind of nice. Of course, not every driver is happy about it. Some are in a hurry and do not really have time to think about death crossing their path. But if everyone else has stopped, they feel compelled to stop also.

But something new was introduced to me recently. I, being the pastor, the one "officiating," was asked to lead the funeral procession, that is, be first in line with my car. They seemed to think this was some great honor. But it is one I had just as soon not received. This has happened to me a few times now and, I must say, it makes me nervous. I mean, for the first couple of times I knew the way, knew I knew the way, but was still afraid that I would make a mistake, lead all those people behind me astray. And there was one time when I was fairly sure I knew the way, even asked the funeral director to be sure, but was not sure I was right until we actually came to the cemetery. What a relief!

### Why Nervous?

You know, thinking about it now, I'm not sure why this makes me so nervous. After all,

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I could make a mistake, be human, make a wrong turn, then get back on the right road. It would not be easy. I would get teased. Might even be a newspaper headline the next day, "Pastor Gets Lost on the Way to Church" or "Bass Swims in Wrong Direction." Why, I could live with that. It's not like I haven't been in the newspaper. Years ago, after moving to a new community, I made the mistake of going fishing with a local Methodist minister. In a couple of days there was a news item in the local paper with the headline, "Local Pastor Lands 170 Pound Bass, Large-Mouth."

No, I think maybe it's something else that was bothering me as I sat all alone in that lead car, a line of lives stretching behind me as far as I could see, all following me, all thinking I knew where I was going, believing in me, trusting that I would lead them to the right place. I think it bothered me because I knew that this is exactly the role I am called to play as a minister. You see, that's how lots of people look at us ministers, we leaders in the church. We might not like it. It might make us nervous. We would gladly pass along that honor to someone else, but let's face it - we often find ourselves leading the way. The heart of the matter is, "Do we know where we are going? Are we leading these people in the right direction?"

### **Leading?**

Some of us aren't leading. For whatever reason - we're tired, afraid no one will follow, that we'll be wrong and blamed for it, or we've been hurt and criticized so much in the past when we did try to lead that we now just pull over to the side of the road and stop. Better to get criticized for going nowhere than to the wrong place.

Some of us go the opposite extreme. One of the things that I had to be careful about when leading the funeral procession was not to lose the rest of the cars! If I got too far ahead, they would be left behind. I might get there okay, but what's the point of getting there alone? Likewise, we can get too far ahead of our people. Better to maintain a decent speed, slowing up when you need to, speeding up whenever you can.

Yes, sometimes you do wish to lead, you see clearly where the church needs to go, what needs to be done, but no one's interested. Some outright oppose you. Try as you might, they had rather stay in Egypt with the known than move toward the Promised Land - the unknown. It is sad but true that many

**"Do we know where we are going? Are we leading these people in the right direction?"**

churches do not want any change at all. They like things the way they have always been, besides, "We've never done it that way." If you truly feel led of God to some new direction and each time you get this kind of reaction so that you never make any progress, you have two choices. You can stay there and try your best to change things, or it may well be that God is leading you somewhere else. God give us the wisdom to know the difference.

Also, there are times when you have to take the role of a prophet, taking a stand on conscience and principle that you know will not be popular, will be controversial, and mean that you have to walk alone. A friend of mine did that in his church during the tumultuous days of the civil rights movement. He felt led to open the church to people of all colors. He received death threats. Many left the church. He eventually was forced to leave

as well. When you feel with all your being that the church is not heeding the will of God, is indeed opposing it, then you may well have to get out there and lead all alone. Chances are it will be costly for you. Being a prophet is never easy.

### **What's the Point?**

"So where's all this leading?" you are asking. "I'm busy. Have things to do, funerals to plan, sermons to write. Get to your point, if you have one."

Well, I have two points as a matter of fact, so be patient.

First, we *are* leaders. We are called to lead. Sorry if you don't like it but it's at the top of your job description. The people in your congregation are looking to you for leadership, not dictatorship, but leadership. You are, in other words, sitting in the lead car. Where are you going to go? Where are

you going to lead them? So, like it or not, you are in the lead car.

Second, because you are in the lead car, I suppose you could just sit there. Too many of us minister-leaders do that. But that does not get us anywhere. It does not get the church where God is calling it to be. God has called us to be leaders. We need to pray, to study, to watch, to discuss, to share, to plan until we have a vision of where God would lead us. A vision is a destination. It's where you feel God would have you go, what you believe God would have you do as a church. Once you see it, all kinds of ways open up for getting there.

Without a vision, the church perishes. We wander around lost in the wilderness. We do not know who we are, why we are, where we are headed.

Part of being a leader is seeking that vision. It is staying close to God, knowing your people and your community, and constantly dreaming of and looking for that new stretch of road ahead that takes you nearer the destination God has for you.

But it is more than *your* vision. At the heart of leadership, I think, is having a vision. But it is not forcing or driving people along like cattle or getting so far ahead of them that you lose them. Visionary leadership talks to the people; shares your vision and asks them to share theirs. It takes time and patience. You can't go as fast as you would like. Going too fast is never wise in cars or the church. You may see the way and know it, and want to go ahead and get there, but you don't. You wait. You encourage. You may even prod and push a little. But you also take into serious consideration that others might see the same destination but know a better route. Sometimes being a good leader means knowing when and how to follow.

Visionary leadership takes lots of time to get out of the cars, gather, pray, discuss, study, get out road maps and plan the way, the route together, so that everyone is involved, everyone is going in the right direction, everyone gets there. And the Good News is that the destination is not a cemetery, a place of the dead, but a living, vibrant church that others will want to be part of, because they see that you really know where you are going.

### Lectionary Resources

Homiliesbyemail.com has tons of lectionary resources. The basic one provides an exegesis, homilies, sermons starters, illustrations, children's sermons, and worship aids – all for only \$69.95 a year. For a free sample, email [debbie@homiliesbyemail.com](mailto:debbie@homiliesbyemail.com)

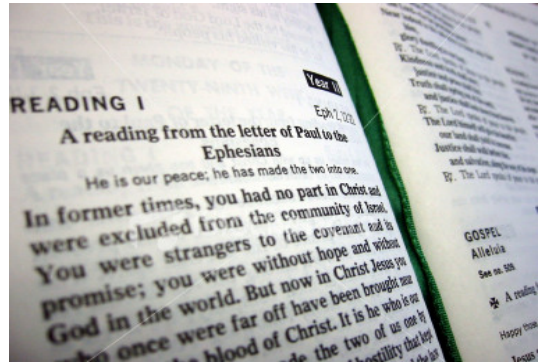
### "I Love My Church"

This is a stewardship program developed by Bass. It can be used over five weeks or compressed for one Sunday. Everything you need is included in the packet, which is sent by an email attachment and/or download. Power point slides are also available. For more information, visit the website at [homiliesbymemail.com](http://homiliesbymemail.com) or email [debbie@homiliesbyemail.com](mailto:debbie@homiliesbyemail.com)

**Complete Power Point Worship Services** This new resource from Homilies by Email provides complete worship services – liturgy, children's sermon, and homily – and all illustrated with power point slides. Each service comes in two parts – a complete script for the worship service in WORD and the power point slides. They save time for busy clergy, as they are easily edited and adapted. Go to <http://www.homiliesbyemail.com> for more information and a sample.

# PREACHING THEMES FROM THE REVISED COMMON LECTIONARY

Each edition of *Clerg-E* will preview upcoming passages from the Revised Common Lectionary, giving some commentary on them and some possible preaching themes. These are from [www.homiliesbyemail.com](http://www.homiliesbyemail.com)



## October 2007

<b>Proper 22 (27)</b>	Lamentations 1:1-6	Lamentations 3:19-		
October 7, 2007	<b>or</b> <i>Habakkuk 1:1-4, 2:1-4</i>	26 <b>or</b> <i>Psalms 137:1-9</i>	II Timothy 1:1-14	Luke 17:5-10

### The Bellows

Text: 2 Timothy 1:6 "For this reason I remind you to keep alive the gift that God gave you..."

(This would be more effective if you actually had a bellows to use as a visual aid.)

One of the fond memories I have of growing up is spending the night at my grandparents. They heated their small country home with a free standing wood heater and a fireplace. I remember waking up in the mornings and it so cold in my room that I could see my breath (but I was nice and toasty under grandmother's thick quilt). And always the morning would greet me with the smell of her homemade biscuits (I loved to eat them with molasses).

One morning I got up early, having heard grandfather stirring about. He was bending down at the fireplace. All I could see there were ashes and charred embers of wood. There was no fire. After putting some kindling there, he took something that had handles and looked like a kind of pump and started blowing air on the seemingly dead ashes (I think he called this fireplace tool a "bellow" but I'm not sure. Maybe you can correct me). To my surprise and delight, since I was cold, the fireplace came alive again, catching the kindling on fire. Soon, the whole room was warm, having banished for a time the chill of the winter night.

I am thinking today that I wish I had such a bellow for my life, even for our church. For sometimes the gifts in me grow ashen, cold (maybe in you, too). For whatever reasons, we can stop using them. Maybe we think we've done our part and the young folks can take over now. Maybe we got hurt. Maybe somebody said something. Maybe someone poured cold water on our flame. Maybe (like in the reading from Lamentations 1:1-6) our grief, our tears smothered it. Maybe we never knew we had a gift, a fire within us. Or



The world threw everything it had at Jesus - even crucifixion, death. Yet, that did not end him, could not defeat him. When we remember that one who has conquered all of this and more also is with us, then we can face whatever the day brings.

C. Remember that Jesus Christ was "born of the seed of David."

I don't think this is just a messianic reference but is saying that Jesus was a real human being. We need to remember this, that he faced all we face, that he's been there, done that. He understands. He can help. He's with us.

D. Remember the "gospel."

Whatever tasks and trials may come, we are a Good News people. We are to share it, to live it, for the world desperately needs it.

**Proper 24 (29)**      Jeremiah 31:27-34    Psalm 119:97-104  
 October 21, 2007      **or**                                      **or**                                      II Timothy 3:14-4:5    Luke 18:1-8  
                                  *Genesis 32:22-31*                      *Psalm 121*

### **A God of New Beginnings**

Text: Jeremiah 31:27-34

The more you read the Bible, the more you begin to see patterns in it, that is, threads woven from book to book. One such thread or theme goes from Genesis to Revelation - God is a God of new beginnings. In Genesis alone, a word that means "beginning," we see God creating new things, new creatures, and constantly giving them new beginnings - with Noah, Abraham, and Sarah, then with all who followed. In The Book of Revelation we see the new Jerusalem, and, indeed, a new heaven and new earth. And between these books we read story after story of the God of new beginnings. So it is hardly a surprise that Jeremiah adds to this never-ending story of new beginnings.

#### **A New Beginning for Judah**

The land of Judah had been devastated by the Babylonians. The people had been exiled. Even the animals had been taken. But Jeremiah sees a new beginning, a second Genesis as God will repopulate the land with people and animals. God will give them a new start (vs 27). The words about plucking up and breaking down given when Jeremiah was commissioned (1:10) are now reversed as God will plant the people and build them up. Though it took decades, many did return to the land, and the nation of Israel began anew.

#### **New Beginnings in Faith**

But something else would be new too. The people had believed a new beginning impossible. Indeed, how could they escape their fate for they believed they were suffering for the sins of their ancestors? So what was the use in even thinking about a new beginning? Such was the depth of their despair. But Jeremiah says here that confession

and repentance do matter (vss 29-30). Accepting responsibility for their own sins and repenting in the present were meaningful actions that turned their hearts back to God and opened them to new beginnings for the future.

Indeed, a whole new beginning is what Jeremiah sees. It will be a “new covenant,” or relationship unlike the one they had known based solely on obedience to laws. They had failed that one miserably. This new covenant would be more personal, written on their hearts. For they would come to “know God” intimately and deeply. They will then seek to serve and obey God out of love and out of that knowledge.

As Christians, we believe that in Christ this promise has been fulfilled, that the world has been given a whole new beginning. Paul goes so far as to say that we have in Christ been made new creations, the old has passed away, the new has come. Think of the many persons who met Jesus who must have thought that new beginnings were impossible. How many, like the blind, the lame, the outcasts, the sinners, the demon possessed found a power in Jesus that gave them a new beginning? Remember the woman at the well? Think of the disciples themselves. Christ gave them many new beginnings. Peter especially. After the death of Jesus, who would have ever thought that he or the others could hope to start again? But Easter came, the ultimate of new beginnings, and gave them and us a new beginning.

Many of us will take and drink from the cup of Christ this day and eat the bread. Whenever we do, we are reminded of the God of new beginnings, of new covenants, a God who just does not want to give up on us or let us give up on ourselves. For this God of new beginnings loves us, forgives our sins and remembers them no more.

	Joel 2:23-32		Psalm 65	
	<b>or</b>		<b>or</b>	
<b><u>Proper 25 (30)</u></b>	<i>Sirach 35:12-17</i>		2 Timothy 4:6-8, 16-	Luke 18:9-
October 28,	<b>or</b>		18	14
2007	<i>Jeremiah 14:7-10, 19-</i>	<i>Psalm 84:1-</i>		
	22	7		

### **At a Distance**

Texts: All

What strikes me about all these readings today is that in each one someone feels or has felt at a distance from God...

The people in the days of Joel felt far from God's love and care as they had experienced famine, drought, and pestilence...

Paul had felt far from others as he stood alone before the power of Rome...

And the tax collector stood "at a distance" in the temple that day because that's how he felt in terms of others and especially God, he was too great a sinner to be brought close...

But Joel promises the people that God's goodness is about to be shown for them in rain and good crops, but especially in God coming so near to them that God's Spirit would be poured over them...

Paul, though he felt at a distance from others, says that he felt God standing beside him all along...

The tax collector is brought near to God through his very expression of unworthiness, while the other, who was also at a distance from God but didn't know it, stays there...

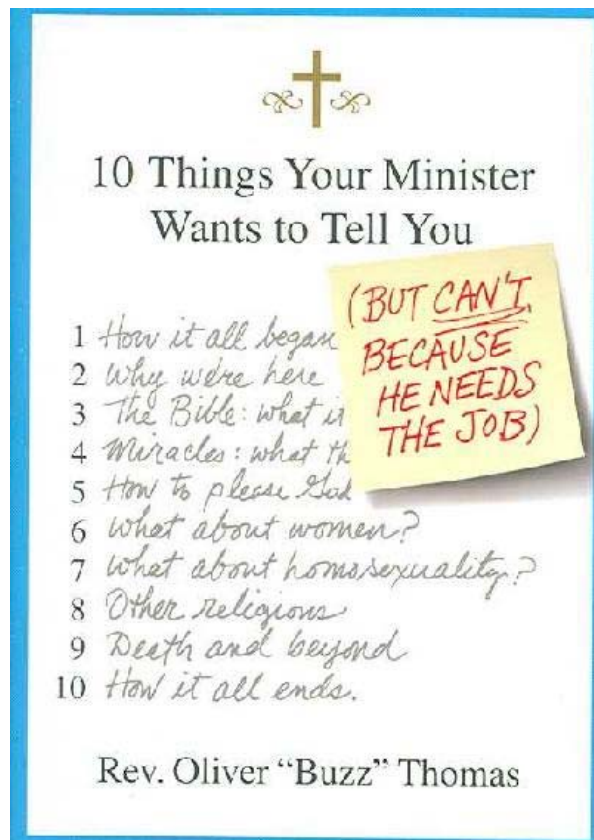
"Happy indeed are those whom you choose and bring near to live in your courts," (Ps 65:40).

Who are those in your congregation who feel at a distance? There is a great good news for them here.

Who are those among you who feel so near to God? There is also a great warning here for them.

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## BOOK REVIEW



This is a delightful book by Oliver "Buzz" Thomas, a Baptist minister and constitutional lawyer who writes columns for USA Today. He tackles some of the most controversial topics around today but in an easy to understand, often humorous way, but also insightful and prophetic. His is a refreshing voice and perspective in a time when the religious Right has held the field. It's a short book. It can be read devotionally, or to glean sermon seeds, or even used in a small group. I've really enjoyed it and wish I had written something like it myself. It was published by St. Martin's Press, New York, 2007.

If you have a book you would like to review for Clerg-E, send it to [clerg-e@homiliesbyemail.com](mailto:clerg-e@homiliesbyemail.com)

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# *Sermon of the Month*

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**Clerg-E** accepts submissions for consideration for Sermons of the Month. Send them to [clerg-e@homiliesbyemail.com](mailto:clerg-e@homiliesbyemail.com) and include if possible a digital photo and brief bio information.

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## **“Strike a Pose” or “Coming Down to Earth”**

Text: Luke 18:914

By Fred Kane

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He is an upstanding religious leader who follows all the rules for proper religious behavior and moral conduct. He seeks to be squeaky-clean in his life and insists on the same from others who attend his church. Perhaps he is here right now. He is here nearly every Sunday morning as he is present in many churches every Sunday morning. He arrives early to sit in his usual pew where he can see the doors and scan the congregation to see who's here and who's not.

He's doing his usual scan before the service when a woman he recognizes from a photo in "The Oregonian" walks in and takes a seat in a pew. He identifies her before the woman buries her face in her hands. He's seen her picture plastered all over the newspaper for weeks. She's been indicted for some pretty outrageous crimes and now she's here in church. She's here in this church. She is here in his church.

He wrinkles his brow and gives his head a slight upward tilt, casting a long glance to the back pews, looking down his nose at the woman sitting alone in the back. "What is she doing here?" he thinks to himself. "My God, what nerve she has to

show up here, now, on Sunday morning after all that she has done. I just thank God that I have never done the things that she's done. I thank God that I've never even thought of doing those things. What could have been going through her twisted mind? I thank God that I was raised by good Christian parents, in a good loving All-American home, and that unlike a lot of people these days I know right from wrong."

When we come to the time to share our joys and concerns this fine Christian leader stands and shares his joy that this church, his church, has so many good people in it and how he is so proud of his church because we are so admired by the best people in Hillsboro. We are a model for children and young people and families. The woman in the back continues to hold her face in her hands and is silent during the sharing time.

When the pastor, who often prays with her eyes open, begins to pray she sees what no one else notices. The woman in the back with her face buried in her hands shakes slightly as silent tears stream from between her fingers. Her head and back slightly bob as she weeps

quietly. Silently she prays, "God, I'm so sorry for what I have done. I'm so sorry for having made a mess of my life. God, what I wouldn't give for a second chance. I know that's expecting more than you could ever give me. I deserve what I'm about to get. I just want you to know how sorry I am and I want to ask you to help the people that I've hurt and if there's anyway for me to ever make it up to them, I want you to know that I would do anything... anything."

The Christian church member sees that woman and prays, "Thank God, I'm not like her," because his sight is obscured by self-pride. His vision of reality is formed by looking at others through the lenses of judgment and self-righteousness. He is so curved-in upon himself that all he can see is how much better he is than others. He can't see through his heart as the Christ did and still does today.

Antoine De Exupery wrote that, "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly: what is essential is invisible to the eye." That is how the Christ-spirit looks at him and that is how he looks at you and at me - through the heart. And when the Christ-spirit looks, we are seen as we really are. That is how Jesus teaches us to see the world and all that is in it. So much of the Gospel is a series of "eye exercises" to teach us how to see through Christ-like lenses.

Do you know what a "poser" is? A poser is someone who pretends to be someone they're not, usually it's seen in their dress or their appearance or in their speech. A poser is a "wanna-be" or a fake. It's borrowed from the French word poseur with the same

spelling and definition. I would tell you that it's sometimes used among younger people to describe those who pose as skaters, but then I would probably need to explain what a skater is.

I don't know if any of you remember Madonna's hit song, "Vogue" when she sings, "Strike a pose. Strike a pose... When all else fails and you long to be something better than you are today I know a place where you can get away. It's called a dance floor, and here's what it's for, so come on, vogue.. Strike a pose."

The Pharisee in our story this morning is a poser. Churches are filled with posers. I'm a poser and if you're anything at all like me and I think that you are, then some of you are posers at times. You and I are posers when we view others with through the lenses of self-righteous pride like the Pharisee in our story from Luke's Gospel. We are posers because our own lenses are clouded by the reality that we too fall short. We fail to do that which we ought and we do that which we ought not. Sometimes that is intentional, sometimes not. But, we are never in a position to judge - never.

We are posers, too, because we put on masks to hide our true selves. And it isn't just in church. It's in our daily living. We are often so afraid to see ourselves as we really are. So we protect our self-image. We guard it with pounds of flesh or the lack of those pounds, with makeup, haircuts, clothes, houses, cars, and in countless ways. We promote the image. We strike a pose.

The German pastor and church leader Dietrich Bonhoeffer gave his life in trying to stop the Nazi death machine. He was executed for his participation in the conspiracy against Hitler. But, his openness and honesty about himself is strikingly caught in his poem "Who Am I?"

*Who am I?*

*They often tell me I would step from my cell's confinement calmly, cheerfully, firmly, like a squire from his country-house.*

*Who am I?*

*They often tell me I would talk to my warden freely and friendly and clearly, as though it were mine to command.*

*Who am I?*

*They also tell me I would bear the days of misfortune equably, smilingly, proudly, like one accustomed to win.*

*Am I then really all that which other men tell of, or am I only what I know of myself, restless and longing and sick, like a bird in a cage, struggling for breath, as though hands were compressing my throat, yearning for colors, for flowers, for the voices of birds, thirsting for words of kindness, for neighborliness, trembling with anger at despotisms and petty humiliation, tossing in expectation of great events, powerlessly trembling for friends at an infinite distance, weary and empty at praying, at thinking, at making, faint and ready to say farewell to it all.*

*Who am I? This or the other? Am I one person today, and tomorrow another? Am I both at once?*

*A hypocrite before others, and before myself a contemptibly woebegone weakling? Or is something within me still like a beaten army, fleeing in disorder from victory already achieved?*

*Who am I? They mock me, these lonely questions of mine. Whoever I am, Thou knowest, O God, I am thine.*

There are times when you and I need to come back down to earth, down to the humus where our souls can be nurtured with humility. Humility comes from the word humus and it literally means to be "of the earth." Perhaps that time is now for you. Perhaps it is time to embrace your earthiness with humility so that the Spirit can lead you to confessing to yourself and to the Divine Spirit who it is that you really are. It's not that God doesn't already know who we are. Not that God needs to know. Not that God is some cosmic voyeur who wants to hear it from our lips. But, we need to say it. We need to admit it. We need to see ourselves as we really are - as God already sees us.

Not that we are to wallow in it. Not that confession should be the focus of our worship or the center of our living. That's what happens in some churches and in some people. They never get beyond the confessional and every moment of their lives is lived under the scrutiny of some inner judge who is constantly ridiculing, finding fault, establishing blame, feeding guilt.

The tax collector in the story from Luke's Gospel went home made-right with God - which means too, that he was made-right with himself. He was "justified" to use theological vocabulary.

He was made right with God and made right with himself and I believe that he left the church that day and he knew that and so he went home and experienced what I think TS Eliot meant when he wrote:

*We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.*

For the first time the tax collector knew what it meant to be home - to be truly home in the arms of a forgiving God. The Good News is that you are forgiven. You are accepted! YOU are accepted. You ARE accepted. You are ACCEPTED. Nothing in all creation can separate you from the love of God. Nothing! You are accepted.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin once wrote, "Some day, after we have mastered the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we will harness for God the energies of love and then for the second time in the history of the world man will have discovered fire." May the fire of the energy of God's love and acceptance burn in your heart this day and every day.

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## **In the World Not of It**

Rev. Pamela J. Tinnin

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Eleven years ago, August 1996, I arrived at my first pastorate, a small church in rural Kansas. The town of Partridge, population 250, was in an area that had a large Amish

population. My first week there I came out of the supermarket in nearby Hutchinson and was surprised to find a horse and buggy parked next to my VW Jetta. Not long after that, on a Sunday afternoon drive, I looked up to see a vehicle approaching. Even at that distance, I could tell it was an Amish horse and buggy, the narrow

silhouette bobbing up and down against the horizon. When we got close, we slowed down, not wanting to spook the horse, a shiny black wet with sweat, legs moving at a smooth trot.

A young couple sat in the open buggy, the man straight and stiff, his suit buttoned to the neck, his flat black hat square on his head, reins held easily in his hands. The young woman wore a black bonnet, her cheeks flushed in the heat, her white collar bright in the clear light, her eyes squinted against the sun. As they passed by, I noticed the woman had her dark blue skirt pulled up just below her knees, her bare feet and legs catching the slightest breeze on a sweltering August day.

I am not a hot weather person and I quickly discovered that Kansas had hot, humid summers. I'm glad that today's cars have air-conditioning, though I do worry about things like pollution and the ozone. In fact, when we purchased a car not long after moving there, our biggest concerns, after cost, easy maintenance, and high gas mileage, was a decent radio/tape player and dependable air conditioning—not hard to tell where *our* priorities were.

In the years since, I've thought about that young couple, how they were living out the teachings of their faith, as uncomfortable as they might have been in dark suit and hat, long sleeves and bonnet, and the buggy that carried them slowly through the hot air of a summer afternoon.

Prof. Marion Bontrager, of Hesston College in Newton, Kansas, tells that the Old Order Amish are one of the fastest growing churches in the United States. Even so, Prof. Bontrager wonders whether the Amish will survive the technological/information age. He said that they're growing because they have large families and a high percentage of their young people stay within the church.

Not surprisingly, there are very few converts, though a limited number marry into the faith. "Amish ways are too hard for most people," said Bontrager. "Lots of people recognize the depth of the Amish faith and the goodness of their values, many yearn for their simplicity—but they just aren't willing to change their lifestyles that drastically."

Not willing to change their lifestyles... There is a recent translation of the Bible called "The Message" by Eugene H. Peterson. He speaks plainly and often bluntly—there isn't a lot of ambiguity in his words. In 1 John, beginning with the fifteenth verse of the second chapter, Peterson translates the text this way: "Don't love the world's ways. Don't love the world's goods. Love of the world squeezes out love for the Father. Practically everything that goes on in the world—wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important—has nothing to do with the Father. It just isolates you from him."

How much do I love the world's ways?  
How much do I love the world's goods?  
What would I be willing to give up my comfortable air-conditioned car? This beautiful mountain ranch where we live now? The security of medical insurance?

Of course, those things haven't been demanded of me, at least not yet. But what of those smaller things, those minor choices? New shoes I don't need, a subscription for a magazine that I could read at the library, that second helping at first Sunday potluck.

Then there are other, subtler ways the world pulls us away from what we know is good and true. Someone I know and like tells me a joke that demeans African-Americans, Muslims, or Jews. Do I laugh uncomfortably? Do I remain silent, acting as if I never heard? Do I speak up, risking the person's embarrassment and resulting anger?

And if I can't pass the small tests, what would I do when faced with the big ones? Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed by the

Nazis only months before World War II ended, gave his life for his faith. Could I?

I wish I had all the answers, but for now it is the questions that plague me. Does the way I live demonstrate my faith? Does the way I live tell people something about the one I claim to follow? Does the way I live bring love into people's lives? Or does the way I live isolate me and others from what is holy, crowding God out of our lives?

Those questions are ones which we must each answer for ourselves—the couple in the buggy on a Sunday afternoon in Kansas, you, me—even James Dobson, the Pope, the President. And when we fall short of perfection—and we will—we can be grateful for the gift of God's amazing grace, which has the power to accomplish

miracles and transform ordinary folks into holy people of God.

In the meantime, my heart lifts a bit whenever I think of my Amish sisters and brothers, those "plain" folks who wear the signs of their faith for all to see, gentle reminders that we are to be *in* the world, but not *of* it.

*Blessings and peace. Pam*

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## The Glory of Fall



## Holy Humor

We are always looking for humor that can be used in preaching, teaching, bulletins, or church newsletters. If you have a joke or something funny that has happened to you, send it to [clerg-e@homiliesbyemail.com](mailto:clerg-e@homiliesbyemail.com)

### Sequels?

One Halloween, a trick-or-treater came to my door dressed as "Rocky" in boxing gloves and satin shorts. Soon after I gave him some goodies, he returned for more. "Aren't you the same 'Rocky' who left my doorstep several minutes ago?" I asked. "Yes," he replied, "but now I'm the sequel. I'll be back five more times tonight, too."

### Say What?

As I was dropping off my son at his daycare the other day, I overheard some of the other children talking about their siblings. "My brother takes karate lessons," bragged one little boy. "My sister takes gymnastics," said another. Not to be outdone, the littlest child in the group piped up. "My sister takes antibiotics!"

### A Tune Up

As song leader for my church in New Hampshire, I was preparing for Sunday. I planned on playing my guitar, but my electronic tuner was missing. "Maybe I left it in the car," I thought. Heading to the garage, I asked the Lord out loud to help me find my "tuner." Nothing was on the back seat of the car, but when I reached under the front seat out rolled a can of tuna. My husband followed my laughter to the garage. "Honey," I said, "The Lord definitely heard my prayer— New England accent and all."

### Go and Baptize!

Pastor Thomas Dunbar of Immanuel Lutheran Church of Avilla, Indiana was in North Carolina two weeks ago to perform his niece Beth's marriage ceremony. While there he baptized his nephew's son, Gage. After the baptism, Pastor Dunbar let Gage keep the seashell with which he had administered the water. The rambunctious 5-year-old said, "Cool! Now I can go baptize people!"

### *More Bulletin Bloopers*

#### Correction?

The following typo appeared in our last bulletin: 'Lunch will be gin at 12:15.' Please correct to read '12 noon.'

#### This is Dedication

Any church member over the age of 18 is invited to participate in this lay ministry program. It requires a minimal amount of training and time. The orientation will include six weekly classes of about 200 hours each Tuesday night.

#### Isn't This Illegal?

Remember the youth department rummage sale for Summer Camp. We have a Gents three-speed bicycle, also two ladies for sale, in good running order.

#### Warning

Vacationing in Alaska, I couldn't help but notice all the warnings about bears posted in campgrounds, visitors' centers and rest areas advising people not to

feed the bears, how to avoid bears, what to do if a bear sees you, what to do if a bear attacks, and so on. My favorite, however, was a hand-lettered sign on the door of a small gas station in a remote

area. It said: "Warning! If you are being chased by a bear, don't come in here!"

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### **The Lord Is My Shepherd...**

A devotional by R. Franklin Gillis Jr.

[FGillisjr@aol.com](mailto:FGillisjr@aol.com)

"The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want." I grew up understanding these words as a foundational expression of faith. Among my childhood memories are the experiences of being nurtured in the faith at Grace Methodist Church in Newport News. A picture of Jesus holding a lamb in his arms hung in my Sunday School classroom. I came to understand through that art form that Jesus was like a shepherd who cared for his flock.

While some persons within the church understand such imagery and its implications, we live in time when many children have never seen a sheep, or do they understand the role of a shepherd. For that matter, it is the same with many adults who do not understand the biblical imagery. So what words can interpret to a twenty-first century technological society the nature of God through Christ? Perhaps a title that communicates to our age (as the term shepherd spoke to previous generations) is that of "primary care provider."

A few years ago, I made a life-changing decision. While I believed the decision was a part of God's plan, it represented a tremendous risk. I left the security of an appointment to follow a passion. When doubt attempted to creep in, I would say, "God will provide." That has been true. I have found the truths expressed in the Twenty-third Psalm to be among the foundation stones upon which I have built my faith. The Lord IS my Shepherd! This profound age-old truth can be claimed by all of every age through faith no matter where one is in life's journey. Knowing this, we can also know that God truly will provide for every life experience and beyond.

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### **Lectionary Leaf**

Looking for a unique resource to encourage your congregation to read the lectionary passages during the week? Try Lectionary Leaf from [homiliesbyemail.com](http://homiliesbyemail.com), a weekly bulletin insert.

# The Bass **BLOG**



I think it was Karl Barth who said that a preacher should hold the Bible in one hand, the newspaper in the other, and bring the two together. I don't know if he said that, but this is pretty much the way I tend to preach, teach, and look at things. I am an avid reader of newspapers. I read at least two every day. I read news groups. I get news alerts when something of interest, at least to someone, happens. (I do not consider the latest info on Britney or O.J. all that pressing or newsworthy, but someone thinks they are.)

I must also say that I prefer the newspaper to TV news. Maybe it's just me, but the journalism of today, TV wise anyway, just leaves me cold and often uninformed. It seems to be more about TV personalities and their latest books than anything else. Most are so biased that when you hear the topic you might as well change channels because you know what their take on it will be. Others are just endless, irritating, annoying debates between so-called "experts" who never bother to listen to one another or consider that there could be any other way to look at things than their way. So, I prefer the newspapers and I know, they have their own bias as well.

Anyway, I often find myself talking back to the newspaper. I know. I may need help with this, professional help. But I read things sometimes that make me angry, sad, joyful, that even inspire and inform me. Yes, lots of the news irritates me. What I want to do in this section of Clerg-E is talk to you instead of the newspaper. Don't expect any great insights here or wisdom. I don't expect you to agree with me. But perhaps you will find something to spark your own interest, help you to bring the Scriptures and culture together.

## **Amazing Amish**

Pam shares above a wonderful piece about the Amish. I must say I have always admired them also. Of course, I was under the delusion once that they all looked like Kelly McGillis in the movie, *"Witness."* Anyway, there was a small article this past week tucked back in the Washington Post that touched my heart and increased by appreciation of them. Perhaps you recall the incident in which a gunman entered an Amish schoolhouse last year. He shot 10 Amish girls, ages 6-14, killing five of them. The other five, wounded, are still recovering. This was on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, so it's almost been a year. Well, a fund was set up after that with donations from all over. You know what these Amish did? They gave a portion of the money to the widow of the gunman, who left his wife and family in such dire straits. They refuse to become a "hostage of hostility," they say, opting instead for forgiveness. Now, don't you think that should have been on page one of every newspaper in this country?

## **Falwell Lives!**

Yes, I live in Virginia, not too far from Lynchburg, the home of the famous or infamous (depending on your perspective) Jerry Falwell and his empire or kingdom. As you may know, he died earlier

this year. Now his son, Jonathan, is following in his father's footsteps as pastor and rallier of what's left of the moral majority. At a recent gathering of pastors, I was not invited for some reason, he told them that they need to go out, register voters, see that "candidates who believe the Bible is truth" are elected. "I had a good teacher," he says, referring to his father.

Oh, I know there are lots of ways to look at this kind of thing. And I admit to encouraging people to vote, that voting is part of being a good citizen and Christians should be good citizens. But for the life of me I cannot see myself telling anybody who they should vote for. I have no problem with Falwell and any other minister doing and saying such things (though the IRS might). If their congregations don't mind, why should I? All I can say is that if I were in a church in which the minister started telling me who I should vote for or how I should vote I would be outta there! It is a dangerous thing to identify any candidate or party as "The Christian" one or the one that's on God's side. Besides, I am an independent spirit. I don't want anyone else doing my thinking or deciding for me. I won't give that up.

I almost attended a very conservative, Falwellian college. Thank God I didn't. Even as just a teen, still wet behind everything, I rebelled against submitting my mind to others. They wanted to tell me what to wear, how long to wear my hair, and what to think about everything! And there never seemed to be any gray areas for them – all was black or white, right or wrong. I can see the attraction of this. It's easy and maybe even comforting to let others do your thinking or voting for you. Saves you the hard intellectual task of reading, studying, praying, wrestling with issues yourself and coming to your own conclusions. Though not as extreme as the Taliban, I see Taliban tendencies in such religious expression. The People's Temple, with Jim Jones, was made up of people who gave up all they had – starting with their own good gift from God to think through things for themselves.

Anyway, this is America, after all. Falwell and we all have our rights to freedom of speech and trying to influence our society and our government. It's Democracy. It only works when we all let our voices be made known. When we sit back and let any one side have all the say, we're heading down a slippery slope indeed. For too long we have done this. People of real faith have different views about many different things. There are actually other Christian pastors out there who did not attend Falwell's gathering. The sharing of all of these is a good thing, I feel. For in so doing perhaps we might all learn and grow some, and who knows, we might even discover we are closer to the truth in so doing.

### **There They Go Again**

Over the summer the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the Catholic Church issued another paper affirming the supremacy of the Catholic Church, sharing that other churches were not full churches of Jesus Christ, but defective, wounded, separate – largely because they did not recognize the primacy of the pope. Part of it reads, "It is difficult to see how the title 'Church' could possibly be attributed to them."

Of course, this is nothing new. It has been their view for a long time. I guess I found myself wondering why my Catholic friends need to say such things? Are we their primary target or are they trying to firm up the faithful? I have no doubt they really believe this. But I wonder if it ever occurred to them how hurtful such things are to the millions of faithful who are not Catholic? The paper says we are suffering from a "wound." I'd suggest that a good portion of the wound is caused by such attitudes. I'd also like to remind my boastful friends that the words "defective,

“separate,” and “wounded” apply every bit as much to the Catholic Church as to any other – and perhaps more so. It seems to me that none of us should be casting stones.

Yes, I am also aware that there are a number of denominations that are also convinced they are the only true church. The Catholic Church does not have a monopoly on that perspective. In fact, truth be told most of us are who or where we are, church wise, believing deep down that we got it just a little more right (or a whole lot more) than the other guys. Looking down a narrow, sectarian nose isn't just a Catholic thing (neither is it a view that all Catholics share, at least ones I talk with).

There is so much hurt, brokenness, and alienation in this world. The tragic truth is that the church too often has been more part of the problem than the solution. When this broken world sees us looking down our noses at one another, proclaiming our own rightness, sitting in judgment on one another, its no wonder it does not look to us for healing and wholeness. We can't even get along with each other! How are we going to be pacemakers in this shattered world!

So, perhaps we need to embrace the fact that we all are defective, separate, wounded, broken – and our only hope is to let ourselves be fully embraced by the grace of God. When that really happens, I think, I hope it will result more in us embracing one another than holding each other at arms length. Who knows, one day we might even be able to sit at the Lord's table together. Wouldn't that be something?