

Words of Encouragement, Sept 20th 2015

*The Sacred Three
My fortress be
Encircling me
Come and be round
My hearth and my home.*

The Nature of Humour: Author/pastor Sherwood Wirt declares, *'If Jesus wept, he also laughed.'* Wirt strongly objects to burying our Lord's sense of humour *'in the sludge of religious sobriety so often mistaken for reverence. Jesus' memorable sallies were forever bobbing to the surface in the sacred writings.'*

What is he talking about? Woody comes up with quite a list. For example, Jesus described the teachers of the (Biblical) law as straining out a gnat (midge) and swallowing a camel. He said it was easier for a camel to walk through the eye of a needle than for a rich man (or woman) to enter the Kingdom of God. Jesus described religious leaders as washing the outside of their cups (what others see and hear of their minds, thoughts) with care but leaving the inside dirty (washing only what is visible to other people while doing nothing about what they were really like inside). He warned against trying to pick a speck of dirt out of someone else's eye when we have a plank in our own eye (nit picking others beliefs, doctrines & practices while ignoring our own faults, prejudices, racism, gender discrimination, etc). He spoke of throwing pearls to pigs as feed! He talked of the blind leading the blind, dead people burying dead people, picking figs off a thistle bush, and hiding a lamp under the bed.

Jesus' humour obviously had a bite to it and he made sharp points which today have a strong message for all Christians who have the courage to explore and acknowledge what is said, and to whom! Yet Woody maintains that Jesus' humour was based in the joy of heaven. His warmth toward children probably included gentle humour, and his back and forth with the woman who said that even puppies get to eat crumbs under the table was likely repartee with a smile.

What does all this mean to us? Wirt quotes preacher Elton Trueblood: 'If Christ laughed a great deal, as the evidence shows, and if he is what he claimed to be, we cannot avoid the logical conclusion that there is laughter and gaiety in the heart of God.'

Father in heaven, let my laughter have you as its source, and let it always please you. Please deliver me from fake human sobriety that has its source in what others might think of me and keep me aware of the plank in my own eye before probing for someone else's speck. Please bring far more genuine Christlike joy and laughter into my life so that I may not only bring lightness into my living, but also into the lives of others.

'You thrill me, Lord, with all you have done for me! I sing for joy because of what you have done.' Psalm 92:4, NLT

'Hold Thou my feet, let there be no returning along the path which Thou hast bid me tread.' Arch R. Wiggins

Hollow People are Very Dangerous: We all ought to be aware of and despise 'hollow people' especially when they are in leadership. They are people who outwardly say whatever they need to say to stay popular while at the same time conviving all sorts of things they know thinking others of integrity would not agree to. One current example would be those who are pushing for the exploitation of our mineral resources but which will at the same time destroy food producing land, pollute fresh water supplies, endanger wildlife, destroy natural assets, release toxic material into the environment, and generally degrade the only environment humans (we) have to live in, and for what? They emphasise the benefit of profits to be earned: for whom? at what cost? and what about future generations? They also relentlessly work at removing whatever legal impediments stand in the way of their greed. These are well funded organisations as potential financial profits have a strong appeal to other supporting organisations and individuals with similar supremely selfish goals. That some such people portray themselves as 'Christian' is the supreme irony and offence and shows the ease by which some people construct their own misnamed 'Christian faith' by ignoring values that run contrary to personal greed driven by short-sightedness. Let us all be discerning at recognising 'hollow people' and fearlessly stand against their schemes. Bill

Beyond the Household of Faith: Luke 6:32-36 *'If you love only those who love you, why should you get credit for that? Even sinners love those who love them! And if you do good only to those who do good to you, why should you get credit? Even sinners do that much! And if you lend money only to those who can repay you, why should you get credit! Even sinners will lend to sinners for a full return. Love your enemies! Do good to them. Lend to them without expecting to be repaid. Then your reward from heaven will be very great, and you will truly be acting as children of the Most High, for he is kind to those who are unthankful and wicked. You must be compassionate, just as your Father is compassionate.'*

One of the dangers faced by every group of Christians is for it to become inwardly focused and to care only for its own. The call in the Christian faith is always a call to also care for the neighbour (others outside our circle). It is very easy to divide the world between those who belong to us, and all the others. An insider-outsider mentality seems to be a part of most of us. And exclusion of 'others' so easily becomes

an attitude and a practice.

One implication of this attitude is that we give preferential treatment to our own. And we may even end up neglecting others. Visitors to churches are usually very sensitive to such an attitude. I hate to think of the number of times I have attended a church service where I can so easily slip away at the end without anyone genuinely welcoming me and seeking to engage me in conversation. It's as if I am an invisible person i.e an outsider. How embarrassing for that church when the only person who speaks to me is a fellow visitor!

People who regard themselves as 'Christian' need to wake up to the reality that they are motivated by a different set of values. All people are made in the image of God and therefore all should be given respect, justice and care. We are called to love, especially the 'outsider', the 'stranger' and even the 'enemy'. This inclusive generosity comes from a love without boundaries. It is a love that, for the sake of Christ, responds to all, even to outsiders and enemies.

That the Christian Church has not, and does not, always practice such love is written large on the pages of history. But through forgiveness, healing, and grace we can become people who show such love, so that a new world may be born. What an important ministry we all share in. God's love has 'all' equally in view. Adapted from Charles R. Ringma 'Hear the Ancient Wisdom' p.157 Cascade Books 2013, ISBN 978-1-62032-772-2]

Facing Challenges with Confidence: Jesus loved a good challenge, and his plan to go to Judea was one of the biggest challenges he would face during his earthly ministry. The last time Jesus had been in Judea, the Jewish leaders tried to take him by force, intimidate his followers, and stop his ministry. But Jesus went anyway.

Some years ago at a Promise Keepers 'Go the Distance' Conference in the USA, Kelvin Miller gave an interesting insight into how to handle those who try to intimidate us. He had competed with his running team in a 1,600 metre championship race at a famous track meet. Kevin was the lead-off man and in the second lane, right next to the man who held the record in the 100 metre dash. As Kevin approached the starting line, this record holder said, *'May the best man win. I'll be waiting for you at the finish line.'*

'We went to the blocks,' Kevin recalled. 'The gun sounded. The 'champ' took off, and the other seven of us settled in behind him. We went around the first turn and down the back straight. About 180 metres into the race, I suddenly saw the record holder in front of me, holding his side, bent over, and groaning as he jogged along. We all passed him like he was standing still.'

At the end of the race, Kevin's coach took him aside and said, *'I hope you've learned a lesson today. It makes little difference whether you hold the record for the 100 metre dash if the race is 400 metres long.'*

Jesus promises us that we will face opposition as we attempt to live our lives for him and to do great things for the Kingdom of God. Knowing that our ultimate victory is assured, we can face any challenge with absolute confidence.

Jesus please give me passion, wisdom, and perseverance as I face the challenges of life ahead of me.

Ammon Hennacy a Christian worker said: *'Love without courage and wisdom is sentimentality, as with the ordinary church member. Courage without love and wisdom is foolhardiness, as with the ordinary soldier. Wisdom without love and courage is cowardice, as with the ordinary intellectual.'*

Lord Jesus, you give life to our understanding of love, courage, and wisdom. Today there are so many paths we might follow. Help us discern the direction to set our faces so that we might meet you at the cross in our willingness to deny ourselves for your kingdom, and at the empty tomb in our living the resurrection. Amen

NO MORE FAKING IT [continued from 6/9/15] When a bounded-set culture is taking over, a church often develops the same 'no-talk rule' as dysfunctional families, not allowing anyone to admit anything is wrong. If someone finally has the courage to say, *'Hey, we've got some problems here,'* the family turns on that person - and real transformation never happens.

When our kids were little, the drive to church was fraught with spiritual warfare: fighting, complaining, and yelling. But as soon as the car door opened in the church parking lot, a miracle happened. It's not OK to not be OK when at church, so we shifted to the emotions the bounded set expected.

But when performance fails, guilt and rebellion follow. At Nyack College we encounter countless students from Christian churches who are stressed out because they can't keep up the bounded-set treadmill. It's not Jesus they are rejecting but bounded-set weariness. Guilt opens the door for rebellion, and we have prodigal people.

I love prodigals, maybe because I was one myself. But rebellion is never the solution to religion because it just trades one bounded set for another. We think the group at the bar will accept us unconditionally, yet once our money runs out or we no longer want to do what they are doing, they too will reject us.

However, if performance works, an elder brother is born. The Christian students I find the most difficult to reach are those for whom the bounded set is working. They went on every mission trip. They went to camp (and never got thrown out like me). They were Bible quizzers. They did everything 'right' and have their performance nailed down.

In Luke 15:20-23, Jesus tells us what happened to the prodigal and his brother: 'So he got up and went to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him; he ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. The son said to him, *'Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.'* But the father, seeking relationship, says to his servants: *'Quick! Bring the best robe and put it on him. Put a*

ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Bring the fatted calf and kill it. Let's have a feast and celebrate.'

One character [besides the fatted calf] was not happy with this homecoming. The older brother says, '*Come on! I've done everything you wanted me to do and avoided all the bad stuff. How come you never threw a party for me?*' Sadly, many elder brothers are in pastoral ministry, and some are on mission fields. **We don't have to run away to go prodigal; we just have to believe that intimacy with God is based on rule keeping.**

And, finally, obedience in a bounded set flows from religious duty. Jesus unmasked the bounded set when they brought him a woman caught in adultery. '*Our rules say she should be stoned,*' they said. Jesus answered, '*Look, if anyone has kept the bounded set perfectly, then let him throw the first stone.*' Slowly the rocks began to fall from their hands because they knew in their hearts it wasn't working for any of them, not just the one caught in sin. *Part 2 of an article by Ron Walborn in Alliance Life Mar/April 2015 - to be continued.*

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Be unusually kind! Do you treat your spouse with unusual kindness? Are your words so kind that others notice? Are your actions so gentle and gracious that people stop to watch and listen? *Lord Jesus, please make me unusually kind so others will notice You in me.*

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Christians are called to be radical, revolutionary, counter-cultural people.

What is the **purpose** of the **Christian Church**? Ephesians 4:11-22 in your Bible means what it says, - that it is responsibility of the leadership of the church to facilitate the equipping of the people comprising the church for ministry! If you would like to know more about how this might be achieved in your church, please let me know and I will send you some information.

Please grasp this opportunity to forward the above on to others. Don't be afraid to take a risk on who! If necessary you can always blame me for any offence you are afraid you might cause! God bless you. Bill