

**LAITY SUNDAY - SUNDAY, 11/13/2011
"A LIFELONG JOURNEY"**

GUESS WHAT? I'M VERY PLEASED TO BE WITH YOU THIS MORNING BECAUSE I AM ALWAYS UPLIFTED BY BEING HERE WITH YOU - MY CHURCH FAMILY. THIS IS ESPECIALLY GOOD TODAY, BECAUSE I AM USUALLY STANDING IN THE BACK OF THE CHOIR LOFT AND SEE ONLY THE BACKS OF YOUR HEADS. NOW I AM LOOKING AT A SEA OF SMILEY FACES!

LET ME START WITH A "HEADS UP". IF YOU ARE EXPECTING AN IN DEPTH ANALYSIS OF TODAY'S SCRIPTURE OR A LEARNED RELIGIOUS TREATISE, YOU WILL BE DISAPPOINTED.

MANY OF YOU ARE FAMILIAR WITH THE "NIGHTS OF NICODEMUS" PROGRAM WHICH IS HELD HERE EACH YEAR AS A PART OF OUR CONFIRMATION PROCESS. THIS IS A FASCINATING PROCESS OF INTROSPECTION AND REFLECTION WHICH ENABLES YOU TO IDENTIFY AND DEFINE YOUR OWN UNIQUE FAITH.

WHEN I WAS INVITED TO SHARE MY THOUGHTS WITH YOU TODAY I DECIDED TO USE THAT SAME APPROACH. THEREFORE, WHAT YOU ARE ABOUT TO HEAR, IS A TALE OF MY LIFE LONG SEARCH FOR GOD AND MY FAITH, AS MARKED BY CRITICAL MILESTONES ALONG THE WAY.

I WAS BORN IN THE DEPRESSION AND IN SPITE OF MY DAD'S NICKNAME OF "DEACON", I DON'T RECALL SEEING ANY BIBLES BEING READ OR LYING AROUND THE HOUSE. HOWEVER, I DO RECALL MAKING THE SHORT WALK TO SUNDAY SCHOOL EVERY WEEK AT THE BIG CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH IN OLD WETHERSFIELD WHERE I WAS BAPTIZED. ACTUALLY, THIS WAS PROBABLY MORE OF A SOCIAL OCCASION THAN RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE.

NEVERTHELESS, I DO HAVE MEMORIES OF BEING DRAWN TO OCCASIONAL CHURCH SERVICES DURING MY COLLEGE AND MILITARY YEARS - WHILE MOST OF MY FRIENDS WERE NOT.

IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING MY MILITARY SERVICE AND AT THE BEGINNING OF A WONDERFUL ALMOST 60 YEAR JOURNEY WITH MY WIFE BEVERLY, WE JOINED THE BURNSIDE METHODIST CHURCH IN E.H. IT WAS THEN THAT BEVERLY BEGAN DELIVERING SONS - FOUR IN ALL. AFTER EACH BIRTH I WAS DRAWN TO THE QUIET CHAPEL AT HH WHERE I NEEDED TO THANK GOD FOR THESE MIRACLES. I KNEW NOT WHAT GOD'S ROLE WAS, BUT I NEEDED TO GIVE THANKS FOR THESE WONDROUS BLESSINGS.

WE GREW IN FAITH IN THOSE EARLY YEARS WITH A GROWING FAMILY. WE JOINED A COUPLES BIBLE STUDY GROUP WHICH PROVIDED MY FIRST SERIOUS EXPOSURE TO THE BIBLE.

AFTER OUR MOVE TO GLASTONBURY WE JOINED ASBURY METHODIST CHURCH AND FOR THE FIRST TIME JOINED BEVERLY IN THE CHOIR. I WAS ALWAYS CAREFUL TO SIT NEXT TO DON HOUSLEY , FATHER OF TIM HOUSLEY, AS MY MENTOR AND WAS GREATLY MOVED TO HEAR GOD SPEAKING TO ME THROUGH THIS MEDIUM.

I HAD LONG FOUND MUSIC TO BE A SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE, WHETHER IT BE BEETHOVEN OR THE BEETLES, MOZART OR DIXIELAND. LISTENING TO THE US ARMY BAND THIS WEEK AT GHS WAS ALSO WONDERFUL! UP TO THIS DAY, HOWEVER, MY GREAT PASSION IS FOR THE GOSPEL HYMNS I LEARNED FROM 20 YEARS WITH THE METHODIST HYMNAL.

BY THE LATE 1970s, WE HAD FOLLOWED OUR SON STEVEN TO THIS VERY SPECIAL CHURCH AND, FOR MANY REASONS, MY FAITH JOURNEY PICKED UP PACE! I BECAME ACTIVE IN THE CHOIR, DEACONS, AND OTHER BOARDS AND COMMITTEES, EACH OF WHICH PROVIDED MUCH GREATER EXPOSURE TO OUR REMARKABLE CLERGY AND CHURCH FAMILY.

OF COURSE, IT WAS AT THIS SAME TIME, THAT I WAS BLESSED TO MEET WALTER BUCKINGHAM, ONE OF GOD'S SPECIAL MISSIONARIES ON THIS EARTH. I WAS FORTUNATE TO SPEND THE NEXT 30+ YEARS STANDING NEXT TO WALTER IN THE TENOR SECTION OF OUR CHOIR. WALTER'S

RECENT DEATH WILL LEAVE A GAPING VOID IN MANY LIVES - INCLUDING MINE.

A PARTICULARLY POWERFUL LEARNING EXPERIENCE WAS WHEN DICK INVITED ME TO JOIN A MENS' BIBLE STUDY GROUP WHERE I MARVELED AT THE WISDOM AND KNOWLEDGE OF THE OTHER MEMBERS. "WOW" IS THAT WHAT THAT PASSAGE REALLY MEANS...!?

IT WAS ALSO IN THAT GROUP THAT I WAS INTRODUCED TO THE PRAYER OF ST FRANCIS OF ASSISSI WHICH HAS BECOME THE CENTERPIECE OF MY PRAYER LIFE.

POSSIBLY THE BIGGEST STEP IN MY JOURNEY WAS IN 2003 WHEN I WAS FIRST VISITED BY CANCER. IMMEDIATELY, OUR THEN INTERIM MINISTER RALPH AHLBERG AND LATER, DICK ALLEN STEPPED IN COMPASSIONTELY TO EASE OUR CONCERNS AND HELP US THROUGH THIS CHALLENGE.

IMPORTANTLY, IT WAS DICK WHO ADVISED ME THAT "MY ATTITUDE" WOULD BE A KEY FACTOR IN MY RECOVERY --- AND HE VOLUNTEERED THAT "HE WOULD BE IN CHARGE OF THAT". WOW! WHAT A LIFT THAT WAS!

MINOR SURGERY WAS SUCCESSFUL - WAS THIS ANSWERED PRAYER? I REALLY DON'T KNOW, BUT IN ANY EVENT, CANCER RETURNED TWO YEARS LATER AND THIS TIME MAJOR SURGERY WOULD BE REQUIRED. BEING A #s GUY BY TRAINING, I OPTED TO GO TO NYC WHERE THIS PROCEDURE WAS PERFORMED FAR MORE FREQUENTLY THAN IN HARTFORD.

PRIOR TO THAT, HOWEVER, I WAS REQUIRED TO UNDERGO EXTENSIVE CHEMOTHERAPY AT H.H. I VIVIDLY RECALL COMING BACK TO S.C. ON THE FIRST SUNDAY AFTER BEVERLY HAD SHAVED OFF THE LAST FEW WISPS OF HAIR ON MY SCALP.

IT WAS VERY AWKWARD UNTIL I STEPPED INTO THE DOOR OF THE CHOIR ROOM WHERE HALLIE HOLLISTER AND PEG REDUKER IMMEDIATELY ERASED ALL OF MY TENSIONS BY ADMIRING MY NEW LOOK AND RUBBING MY BARE SCALP FOR “GOOD LUCK”. THE NEXT WEEK DAVID BLAKE BROKE ME UP WHEN HE PRESENTED ME WITH A BRIGHT, FLOURESCENT BLOND WIG. IS THIS A GREAT FAMILY - OR WHAT?

WHEN I HAD MY SURGERY IN JUNE, 2006 IN NYC, BEVERLY LIVED IN A HOTEL ACROSS THE STREET AND MULTI-TASKED EFFECTIVELY. SHE COPEDED WITH LIFE IN THE BIG CITY, LEARNED HOW TO USE A LAP TOP COMPUTER, COMMUNICATED WITH FAMILY AND FRIENDS AND RAISED MY SPIRITS.

FOR MY PART, I FOUND THE NURSES TO BE WONDERFUL AND PATIENT AND I THANKED GOD FOR LIFE AND STRENGTH. IN THE QUIET AND DARKNESS OF NIGHT, I RECITED WHAT I COULD REMEMBER OF THE PRAYER OF ST FRANCIS AND THE 23RD PSALM AND SANG MYSELF TO SLEEP WITH THOSE OLD GOSPEL HYMNS. MY RECOVERY WAS STEADY AND SUCCESSFUL AND I CONTINUE TO THANK GOD FOR LIFE AND A MULTITUDE OF BLESSINGS

I DIDN'T EXPECT EVER AGAIN TO HAVE ANOTHER EXPERIENCE THAT COULD MATCH THIS AT THE EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL LEVEL, BUT THE YEAR 2008 CAME CLOSE. YES, THAT WAS THE YEAR OF THE “GREAT RECESSION”, BUT WHAT I AM TALKING ABOUT IS OUR “EMBODY THE SPIRIT” CAMPAIGN HERE AT SOUTH CHURCH. I WAS FORTUNATE TO BE INVITED TO BE A PART OF THAT INCREDIBLE EFFORT.

YOU MUST REMEMBER THAT ROUGHLY 200 MEMBERS OF OUR CHURCH FAMILY DEDICATED THOUSANDS OF HOURS OF TIME AND ENERGY TO RAISE THE FUNDS TO ENABLE US TO MAKE OUR WONDERFUL NEW FACILITIES BECOME A REALITY.

DURING THAT YEAR THERE WERE MANY MEETINGS AS WELL AS SMILES AND LAUGHTER, HOME VISITATIONS AND “SPIRIT PARTIES”. A

REMARKABLE GATHERING WAS HELD ON DECEMBER 7TH, 2008 HERE IN THIS SANCTUARY ON A DAY WE CALLED “DECISION SUNDAY”! WAS ALL OF OUR INSPIRATION AND PERSPIRATION SUCCESSFUL?

THIS VENERABLE MEETING HOUSE WAS FILLED WITH EXCITEMENT, SUSPENSE AND MANY PEOPLE OF ALL AGES. AFTER SONGS AND PRAYERS WE SOON LEARNED THAT WE HAD INDEED REACHED OUR FINANCIAL GOALS FOR PROCEEDING WITH OUR NEW FACILITY. THERE WAS AN IMMEDIATE ERUPTION OF LAUGHTER AND TEARS, HUGS AND CHEERS. IT WAS CLEAR TO ME THAT THE “HOLY SPIRIT” WAS AMONG US AS WE CELEBRATED THAT EVENING.

EVEN MORE RECENTLY, 10/2/11, WE CELEBRATED THE 175TH ANNIVERSARY OF SOUTH CHURCH. I SUSPECT THAT THOSE OF YOU WHO WERE HERE WOULD AGREE THAT THIS TOO WAS AN EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL EVENT.

DO YOU REMEMBER THAT IN HIS SERMON THAT DAY, TED HOSKINS SAID THAT “HE HAD NEVER HEARD THE VOICE OF GOD”! THAT STRUCK ME LIKE A THUNDERBOLT BECAUSE I HAVE OFTEN THOUGHT THE SAME THING. MAYBE, HOWEVER, I JUST HAVEN’T BEEN LISTENING. HAVE I REALLY BEEN SEARCHING ALL OF THESE YEARS OR SIMPLY RESPONDING TO THE TUG OF THE HOLY SPIRIT? I DON’T KNOW.

ALTHOUGH I HAVE SHARED WITH YOU THE MANY WAYS I HAVE SENSED THE PRESENCE OF GOD OVER THESE MANY YEARS, IT IS IMPORTANT TO ME THAT YOU KNOW THAT THE PRINCIPAL CONSTANT DURING THIS JOURNEY HAS BEEN THIS CHURCH FAMILY. IT IS DOZENS OF YOU FOLKS, MANY HERE THIS MORNING, WHO HAVE RADIATED YOUR OWN FAITH IN YOUR EYES AND WORDS, AND IN YOUR DEEDS AND YOUR LIVES.

THIS IS WHY I COME HERE EVERY SUNDAY MORNING WHEN POSSIBLE, SO I CAN GET RECHARGED THROUGH YOU AND THE SERVICES. IT IS YOU - THE YOUNG AND OLD, MEN AND WOMEN WHO ARE MY GUIDES AND INSPIRATION AND I THANK YOU FOR THAT!!

IT IS MY HOPE THAT IN HEARING ABOUT THE KEY EVENTS THAT HAVE DEFINED MY FAITH JOURNEY, EACH OF YOU WILL BE REMINDED OF THE CRITICAL EVENTS IN YOUR LIVES THAT BROUGHT YOU TO TODAY, WHO YOU REALLY ARE AND WHAT YOU BELIEVE.

**I WOULD LIKE TO CLOSE WITH THE PRAYER OF ST FRANCIS OF ASSISSI
LORD MAKE ME AN INSTRUMENT OF THY PEACE; WHERE THERE IS HATRED, LET ME SOW LOVE; WHERE THERE IS INJURY, PARDON; WHERE THERE IS DOUBT, FAITH, WHERE THERE IS DESPAIR, HOPE; WHERE THERE IS DARKNESS, LIGHT; AND WHERE THERE IS SADNESS, JOY.**

DIVINE MASTER, GRANT THAT I MAY NOT SO MUCH SEEK TO BE CONSOLED, AS TO CONSOLE; TO BE UNDERSTOOD , AS TO UNDERSTAND; TO BE LOVED, AS TO LOVE; FOR IT IS GIVING THAT WE RECEIVE; IT IS IN PARDONING THAT WE ARE PARDONED AND IT IS IN DYING, THAT WE ARE BORN TO ETERNAL LIFE.

AMEN

NOW LET US JOIN IN SINGING HYMN #475, "GOD'S EYE IS ON THE SPARROW", ONE OF THOSE WONDERFUL HYMNS I SANG TO MYSELF WHILE IN THE HOSPITAL IN NYC.

BEFORE SAYING THE BENEDICTION I INVITE YOU TO STAY SEATED FOR THE POSTLUDE BY ANDERS WALDO.

NOW, AS WE PREPARE TO DEPART, LET US PRAISE GOD FOR BOUNTEOUS BLESSINGS, AND GO IN PEACE.

AMEN