

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost  
 October 12, 2008  
 10.12 Means of Grace—Celebration & Spiritual Friends

Philippians 4:1-9

Resource: *Claim the Name: Confirmation Teaching Plans for 6-15 Weeks*, 2006.

Have you seen the new Dentyne ad campaign, “Make Face Time”? The tv ad begins with a bunch of friends just hanging out in one of their rooms, laughing & enjoying one another’s company. Over the scene, as though being typed on a computer screen... “chatroom full.” It shifts to a swimming hole where two young girls swim to the side & begin whispering in each other’s ear... “voicemail.” Again the scene changes... a soccer field... a goal scored... teammates celebrating with one another... “friend request accepted.” Next, two people hugging... “transfer complete.” Finally, a romantic kiss... “instant message.” (In the print ads that one’s called “the original instant message.” There are at least two more print ads. Both involve a romantic embrace & kiss between a couple lying in the grass. One simply says, “send & receive.” The other script is more involved, spelling out all in lower case (ala instant messaging), “power down. log off. unplug. have mercy on your thumbs. browse the worldwide something else. send some not-so-instant messages. undo. hit cancel. be together. make face time.”

With that I just had to go to their website. On the homepage I found this message, “Welcome to the 3-minute Website. You have 3 minutes. After that, the site shuts down. We’ve got nothing against the internet, but when people are surfing the Web, they’re missing the best part of life—being together. That’s why we’ve created the first website devoted to helping people spend less time online & more time with each other. For starters, we’ve allocated just enough time to browse every link, but not a second more. So enjoy your three minutes, then get out there & make face time. Chop Chop. Time starts now.”

Three minutes for gum—that’s probably about right. Still, *making face time*. We’re going to come back to that shortly.

Over the past several weeks we’ve been talking about the one condition & three rules the Wesleys employed in their quest after God. To review:

One Condition: “a desire to flee from the wrath to come, & to be saved from [our] sins.”

Rule #1: “By doing no harm, by avoiding evil of every kind.”

Rule #2: “By... doing good of every possible sort, & as far as possible, to all.”

Rule #3: “By attending upon all the ordinances of God.” (*The Book of Discipline of TUMC*, 2004, pg. 48)

The ordinances of God which we have covered to date include communion, prayer (both family & private), fasting or abstinence, the ministry of the word (either read or expounded), & searching the scriptures. Along with these we have included several means of living & growing in grace, including generous living, simplicity, intercessory prayer & meditation. It is important to remember that doing these things is not required for our salvation. Neither will doing them make God love us any more than God already does. They are simply tools—gifts, if you will—that millennia worth of Christian experience has demonstrated will help us in our quest to find God, grow in both faith & grace, & live evangelically. They are invaluable to us, even in the best of times. They are beyond words, much less price, when times are hard.

As you well know, times are hard. How many of us have been following the financial crisis? Checking the stock markets? Beginning to worry about retirement?

I have. But it's not about Sandra's & my retirement. That's still over twenty years off. Sure, our portfolios have lost value over the past fifteen months, but there's plenty of time for them to recover. In the meantime, we're getting lots of bargains with our continuing contributions. No, it's not our retirement. It's those who already have.

They say that retirement accounts in this country have lost around \$2 trillion over the last fifteen months. That was before the stock market had its worst week ever, falling 2,279 points in just seven days. I don't even want to think what it looks like now. But the losses on our statements just mean a little hitch in our get-along. The income from those statements is still far off. For those who are retired now, however, those statements represent a loss of real income. It means being that much closer to losing your home, your independence, your dignity. It means relying more heavily upon Social Security, Medicare & Medicaid—& they tell us those programs are in trouble. We look around & see family & friends hurting. What does the future hold? We don't know. But I can tell you, it keeps us awake at night.

During last week's presidential debate, both candidates were asked what sacrifices they might expect &/or ask of us. Their answers were less than stirring. Sen. McCain spoke of spending cuts, freezes & earmarks. Sen. Obama spoke of energy conservation, Vista & Peace Corp. I found myself thinking about Dentyne. (Okay, it was the next morning—a little poetic license here!) But let's not come back to that quite yet.

In terms of sacrifice, may I make a suggestion? Maybe it's time for us to sacrifice some of our dreams for the future—dreams of careers, success, more money, bigger homes, better cars, & a better life. Perhaps it's time for us to put on hold our relentless drive for that “better life” in exchange for a life that actually is better, more blessed, & more of a blessing. Maybe it's time for us to slow down—to take time for family, neighbors, & community—to “make face time.” (Okay, let's come back to it now.)

Do you remember a time when we gathered with friends just to play board games or cards? Do you remember when Friday nights were community events & when everybody danced, even those of us who were rhythmically challenged? Do you remember when Sunday church wasn't rushed but could be celebrated & enjoyed, could be relaxed & uplifting, & no one wanted to go home? Do you remember when Sunday dinners were a big deal with family & friends & when evening dinners were always shared around the table? I know, today's a different time & we can never go back to the way things were. The games may be Wii & X-Box & Game Cube, the music might have a different beat & sound, & the dinners may have less Jello—but wouldn't it be nice to “make face time”?

There are two things I want to lift up this morning from Paul's letter to the Philippians. First, he writes, “Rejoice in Christ always; again I will say rejoice.” They weren't going through easy times. They were a fledgling church, persecuted by the world, not fully trusted by the rest of the church, & oftentimes even at war within itself. But Paul promises them that Christ is near, “And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts & your minds in Christ Jesus.” He reminds them that it is possible to rejoice, even in difficult times. Nay, it is necessary. It is necessary even in the best of times. It is one of the means of grace. Celebration.

But it is also necessary to do it together with friends. That's the second thing. Paul pleads with Euodia & Syntyche & all the church to help one another, to sustain one another through Jesus Christ in good times & in bad. This is also one of the means of grace. The Wesleys call it spiritual friends. In times like these we need friends who lift us up in the Spirit.

So what do I want us to do this week? (question asked of Bishop Blake by a Texas 6-year-old) Just what Paul commands. Dwell on these things, for they are good. Dwell on them & do them.