

Reflections, August 2009

Thursday, August 6, 2009

It took me three tries to get my cooking merit badge when I was a Boy Scout. The first time, I couldn't get the fire lit with the two matches the rules allowed (the tougher boys loved starting fires, but I had to screw up my courage just to light the match and hold it). The second time, I cooked a whole dinner for four but burned the pudding, and couldn't get the pot clean in the allotted hour after serving the meal (it had to soak overnight).

Max Gerwig, our Scoutmaster, was a stickler for the rules. No extra match, no overnight soak. But when he signed off on your merit badge, you knew you'd done something worthwhile. You could feel his pride in you when he pinned the merit badge on your sash. Best of all, you felt he'd believed in you all along, even when match #2 flickered out and all the elbow grease in the world wouldn't dislodge the burned pudding.

Max Gerwig was standing in for my dad, who died 51 years ago today. In the mysterious, sometimes terrible providence of God, voids cannot be filled. Doing so would, perhaps, diminish the value of what's been lost. But small lights in a big darkness show you a way forward.

Thursday, August 13, 2009

Sometimes we say "I had a productive day." We accomplished what we set out to accomplish, or at least did things that needed doing.

We're not always productive. Certain circumstances, like illness or disability or unemployment or incarceration or homelessness or aging—these circumstances are legion—curtail or eliminate productivity. They raise a more general, and vexing, question: What's the relationship between productivity and human value?

Surely our value stems from more, or other, than how much or how efficiently we produce. Still, we see unproductive days as bad days, and start to wonder about our worth if, for whatever reason, we have a lot of them. We'll explore themes related to productivity in our September Adult Forum, beginning Sunday, September 6 at 9:40 am in the Parish Hall.

Thursday, August 20, 2009

Psalm 127, verse 3: "God gives to his beloved sleep."

Some of us don't sleep well. All of us know someone who doesn't. If we do, we forget what a blessing it is.

Jesus enjoined us to let each day's trouble be sufficient for that day. When night comes, we hope and pray that God will help us lay the day's fears and hopes, anxieties and challenges to rest. Tomorrow will bring new ones, related to today's but different, to be taken on their own terms. Meanwhile we long, and need, to rest. Give to your beloved sleep, good Lord.

When I lie down at night I think of my roommate on a trip to Central America many years ago. He slept like a log. When he folded his large and aging frame into bed at night, he invariably said "Thank you, Jesus," anticipating the sleep to come. "Amen," I said.

Thursday, August 27, 2009

As we mourn Edward Kennedy, I can't stop thinking about Mary Jo Kopechne. A passenger in the Senator's car, she drowned when the car careened into a pond, forty years ago. He swam to safety, then fled the scene, not reporting the incident for hours.

Could Senator Kennedy have atoned for a wrong as grave as this one? No; no one could. Only the sovereign mercy of God can effect this—or perhaps any—kind of atonement. His task was more modest: do the decent thing. He undoubtedly dedicated his Senate career to causes in which he wholeheartedly believed, with arguably greater seriousness after the Kopechne tragedy. Does this meet the "do the decent thing" standard? His career brought him fame and, in some quarters, adulation. Was it seemly, decent, for him to continue in public life and reap its rewards?

I don't know the answers to these questions. I feel sure, though, that they're being addressed now. Kennedy's and Kopechne's paths have again crossed, in the presence of the One who judges the living and the dead. Our own sins may be less grave than the one at issue here. Whatever they are, we look to the cross for atonement. Still, God has a question for us too. Did you embrace the modest task that fell to you, and do the decent thing, when you hurt another human being? Or did you move on as if nothing had happened?