

Here's what we've been talking about at Theologic Al's. From the beginning!

FEBRUARY 24

Welcome, Can We Say Grace?

We began with a welcome, of course, and a word of grace; but also a question about grace. Rick asks about natural grace and how we experience it, indeed how we *can* experience it if we are fallen and nature, too. Perhaps, he suggests, nature isn't as fallen as we are. Then, he draws on a dead German poet as proof text.

MARCH 01

What'll Ya Have?

Julie draws instead on life—and her own experience as a bartender in a real bar at a country club in Indianapolis where she grew up. It wasn't so much the church that supported her when she went off to study at Princeton Seminary but the Sunday golfers, many of whom had sworn off church. Grace does come unexpected.

MARCH 02

Russ Lasso's the Holy Spirit

And Gerald agrees . . . if we expect it. There are those who won't—among them Russ Moore, dean at Southern Baptist Seminary in Louisville, who seems to want to confine the work of the Holy Spirit, to lasso God's grace and brand it, so no one else can rustle it. Well, he's shutting the corral after the cattle have escaped, Gerald thinks. He has even experienced grace from . . . the French.

MARCH 03

Monk-y Business

The French? They don't even bathe regularly. So, Rick consults someone who does, the obsessively clean and orderly TV detective Adrian Monk. [Russ Moore, Monk – separated at birth?] But what do you do, you who love order, with "the wind [that] bloweth where it listeth?" (John 3:8, KJV) and worse with the Spirit that blows us where it listeth? It's good to have a Bible with a zipper, he decides. The Spirit might escape from the edges of the pages otherwise.

MARCH 06

A Bit Windy

The wind! Lynn writes of trying to walk a labyrinth in Wyoming winds and having to start over and over again because it would blow her from the "right" path into the "wrong" one. And she decides it's a worthwhile exercise. The life of faith can't always look to the hills; sometimes you have to lean in and put one foot in front of the other. You have to pay attention and watch where you're going.

MARCH 07

The Way, the Truth, and the Life

Dee decides that if there is order, it's not Monk's order, or Russ Moore's, which have less to do with order than control—and the desire to control not only our salvation but that of others. Actually, we're in charge of neither: "We have absolutely nothing to do with our salvation. It's all grace all the time. Not a song we can sing, a feeling we can feel, a doctrine we can affirm, a church we can join, nor a cause we can support has anything to do with it." Sorry!

MARCH 07

"Holy Contradiction, Batman!"

So, what *do* we do? Julie offers the possibility of living in "holy contradiction," affirming both that the Spirit of God blows *wherever* it wills and that Jesus is the way the truth and the life. It may also mean living in a wilderness of temptation. (See Luke 4.) Finally, it may mean that grace actually meets us in temptation, both when we resist and when we succumb and sin. But how?

MARCH 08

Bureaucracy? No Koan Do?

Gerald wonders then, if grace meets us in all temptations. His bugbear (this time) is religious bureaucracies, who are tempted to view "holy contradiction" as a mortal enemy, because they need to solve the problem. He's not opposed to decisions, Gerald says, but rushing into a "solution" may well be an attempt to avoid opening ourselves to God's holy mystery.

MARCH 10

My name is Rick, and I'm a bureaucrat."

Rick sadly agrees. But it's not a new problem—it's at least as old as Peter's desire to set Jesus straight about his mission. See Mark 8, where the once and future Pope takes his master aside and says in effect, "The cross? No, you're the Messiah. Let me explain." Do we avoid Peter's mistake? Well, when Rick, the

bureaucrat, hears "Take up your cross," *he* thanks God it's *his* cross. That means he gets to say what it means. Right?

MARCH 13

Today's Reality

Lynn sympathizes. She's escaped the minus 3 degree weather into her local coffee shop, where she's ordered a double non fat wet cappuccino and broken her Lenten fast. She's broken the fast, moreover, because she has led herself into the temptation. To take up your cross, she reminds, is also to lose your life for Christ's sake and the sake of the gospel. And that is to find new life *and* light. So this from Gandhi's favorite hymn, John Henry Newman's "Lead, Kindly Light":

I was not ever thus, nor prayed that thou shouldst lead me on;
I loved to choose and see my path; but now lead thou me on!

MARCH 15

Welcome to Bracketville

To take up your cross, Dee adds, *is* to take up *your* cross—NOT Christ's which was his alone. But *your* cross doesn't mean that you define it. And in some ways it is defined by the world you live in: "We're not free to live in another world," after all, "or to pretend this one doesn't exist." No, "we have to resist the evil let loose in [this] world." And if we fail? The last word is still grace: in a basketball metaphor fit for the season—not Lent, but March Madness—"there's always another practice, the next game, a new chance to get it right . . . It's never one and done" until that last buzzer sounds "and all that other stuff happens."

MARCH 16

Answering to Jesus

There *is* grace, Gerald agrees, but there is also all that other stuff: accountability. So, how do we imagine accountability to Jesus? And he sites an illustration taken from the TV sitcom "Scrubs" in which a doctor, having mercilessly berated a young intern, steps to the nurses' station and says to the head nurse, "I'm sorry you had to hear that." To which she replies, "You don't have to apologize to me, but you will have to answer to Jesus!" But what answer does Jesus ask from us. Well, in John 5, he asks the man at the Bethesda pool if he wants to get well. "If we know we're accountable, we'll know the answer is 'yes!' If we ignore our accountability, we don't even hear the question."

MARCH 17

Saviors, Books, and Kings Starting with S

It's not that *he* hasn't heard the question, but he's not sure he's ready yet to answer, "Yes, I do." So Rick changes the subject altogether to . . . **S**olomon and **S**aul and **S**hakespeare's Henry IV: "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." He's about kings and crowns as a way of trying to understand power, for doesn't Paul understand God's weakness in terms of human might (1 Corinthians 1:25). On the one hand, "God's weakness . . . doesn't have to be too powerful to be stronger than men, for even the strongest of us are frail of body, faint of heart, and feeble of spirit, beaten down by the past, laid low by our futures." But how does God's weakness make us strong? It's not a rhetorical question; he really doesn't know.

MARCH 20

Equinox

The new week begins on the equinox, and though it's snowing (again) in Wyoming, Lynn takes "the date's significance to be that winter days are limited." On the other hand, it was three years ago on March 20 that the war on Iraq began. What limits those days? As part of her amends for Al's part in the war, she offers a poem by Wendell Berry. Among other things "Purification" acknowledges the poet's sin: "that I have not been happy / enough, considering my good luck; / have listened too much to noise; / have been inattentive to wonders;/ have lusted after praise." Still as he buries the contents of last year's outhouse and closes the trench, he imagines that "Beneath that seal / the old escapes into the new."

MARCH 22

Contested Shots

Dee counters Wendell Berry with Kris Kristofferson and John Prine. Both are "mature skeptics," one of which (Kristofferson) may have returned to faith. Is the other (Prine) on his way? Dee admits he doesn't know—he's not on the

speed dial of either singer-songwriter. But he is believing today that when “skepticism . . . circles back to faith, it improves faith, or maybe it improves the faithful person, gives him or her an edge, a texture, some substance he or she wouldn’t otherwise have. Dee’s not writing a paean to doubt, though, but to freedom. As Kristofferson sings, “The truth is a highway / Leading to freedom / All is forgiven / Love is to blame.”

MARCH 22

The Temptations

It may be the equinox—a time for poets and for singing. Julie reminds that it is also Lent, bringing Al’s barflies back to task at hand—and Lynn’s post of the Monday before—in a meditation on the nature *and* function of temptation. Can temptation have a function? “This is a new concept for me. Usually, I pray to avoid temptations or ask for forgiveness when I succumb to temptation. But to practice...paying attention to my cravings and temptations has helped me to see my emptiness and longing differently. My prayer has been to ask God to fill those cravings not with whatever glitters and gleams” but with an invitation into deeper relationship.

MARCH 23

Swinging with The Temptations – Side B

Gerald responds by dreaming of cake and breaking *his* Lenten fast. He also acknowledges that neither does he “find it easy to distinguish God’s beckoning of me, on the one hand, from the temptations that are not of God, on the other.” And he wonders if “conventional Christian wisdom [can] easily distinguish all temptation from divine beckoning.” The emphasis is on “conventional.” When Nicodemus wonders if Jesus shouldn’t be given a fair hearing (John 7:50-51), his colleagues taunt him. Clearly he hasn’t been reading Scripture. These colleagues “represented the prevailing wisdom of god’s people. They represented resistance to temptation. And they missed the point.”

MARCH 24

Fun with Iambis

Speaking of which (missing the point), Rick tries again to change the subject, this time with a “poetic” translation of the gospel lesson for the coming Sunday, John 3:14-21. Unfortunately, not all God’s chillun got rhythm.

MARCH 27

Prayer: A Question

Lynn aptly answers that attempt with a quote from Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*—though Rick isn’t all that young and Rilke’s point and Lynn’s is *not* about iambs but about living with questions. Lynn’s question in particular has to do with prayer. You know, does it work? (And if it does, how?) Lynn’s prayers for her friend Betty struck down by a strange but powerful virus and for her friend Charlotte whose child is an addict may give comfort to Charlotte and Betty’s family. They say they do. But how? Just how?

MARCH 29

Child’s Play

Julie also writes about prayer, and its mysteries, some of which, she finds, are best addressed by children like Will, who when asked what happens when his prayer doesn’t work, answers, “What do you mean? My prayers can’t break and don’t need batteries,” and who counsels, “Julie, don’t think so much.”

MARCH 30

Snake Handling

Will hasn’t, however, talked to Dee. So, Dee books a ticket to the heavenly precincts (armed with tourist visa and press pass) to talk to one of God’s secretaries, Stanley, who is going to help him *think* through Numbers 21:4 and following. The ensuing conversation ranges from snakes to monotheism (“self-evident only to mono-theists”), from sympathetic magic to the Guinea worm, and from coincidence to providence. Yet, it isn’t at all as confusing as it sounds.

MARCH 31

More Snakes

That doesn’t mean that Rick understands it. But he doesn’t pretend to. Instead, he talks with a wise old friend about the friend’s loss of faith, which he doesn’t see how he’s going to get back. “It’s not like you can go out into the garden and pick faith like you pick strawberries.” Somehow they get on the subject of the ordination of gays and lesbians, which the friend opposes—still interested in the church despite his loss of faith. Rick wants to know why the church is so obsessed about sex. Aren’t there more important things to argue about—killing,

stealing, lying, to cite the commandments? The friend wants to know why Rick thought he wanted to argue.

APRIL 03
DST'ED

Lynn is grieving at the loss of her friend Betty. The doctors are unable to explain either the cause of her sudden illness; nor were they able to cure it. Lynn has also been reading about the latest scientific studies of prayer. They don't seem to know anything either. Nor does she. But it's time, if an hour less of it, as the clocks spring forward—it's time to give up knowing, at least for a while, time to grieve and, in the words of the country-western song, let "Jesus take the wheel."

APRIL 04
Just Another Day

On this typical Tuesday, Dee finds himself wondering about many things. About how much pastors are like Pontius Pilate, because "we do similar things, I've noticed, ducking this confrontation, ignoring that conflict, dodging this issue, congratulating ourselves that we pick our battles wisely, that we want to live to fight another day." Prophets can do what they want and head for the next town. But pastors can't. That starts Dee thinking about modern prophets, particularly Martin Luther King, assassinated this day in 1968, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, executed April 9, 1945. Then there's the sparrow perched singing in the "Tree of Heaven" by the parking lot. Just another day.

APRIL 05
Prayer and Preparation

A day for a journey. Julie writes of participating in a Women's Seder, making preparations to go to Jerusalem. How "do we separate ourselves from our *daily* spiritual journey" to enter into the holiest week of the year? "What must we let go of and how can we be open to what . . . God would do in us?" It is time to get ready, "to clean our homes, our schedules and our hearts that we might enter [Holy Week] ready to receive the mitzvahs," the blessings God wishes to give us.

APRIL 06
The Media

It would be easier to do that, Gerald thinks, if the media would let us alone. Not that its entirely their fault: we pick them up at the newsstand, we turn them on in our homes. But, this night when he flips on Wolf Blitzer (flips *on*) he finds him hawking the Gospel of Judas. Right before Easter. Is this news? There's nothing new about it. No, it's effect. The media, Gerald decides, is "a salesman"; he doesn't bring the news, he peddles a product. Or he's "an agent." He gathers "all kinds of stuff" and then pitches it. Above all, he mediates. That means there must be an alternative: what about "immediate"? Is there maybe "an immediate world all around us" and we're missing it?

APRIL 07
Ride on Home, Jesus

Rick is on an actual, physical journey. He writes from his parents' house in Michigan, wondering about the nature of "home." The house is familiar, but the town is not. He grew up *quite* a ways away in southwest Virginia. "And in many ways I'm at home there still, as if I could breathe best at 2500 feet among oaks and dogwoods and people who use the word "tar" to refer not only to the surface of a road but to a wheel on an automobile." On the other hand, he knows no one there. "We've all grown up and gone away. And we've all read Thomas Wolfe." Jesus hadn't though, and this week, as Palm Sunday approaches, he starts home. He may have been born in Bethlehem; there was time in Egypt, the boyhood in Galilee. Still, for Jesus "Jerusalem is home. That's where his father's house is (Luke 2:49; Mark 11:17). So on Palm Sunday, he is coming home. Except he can't."

APRIL 13
Reading Palms

By some quirk of fate, Monday goes missing and Tuesday and Wednesday get published on Thursday. Dee is thinking about David Sedaris and Eudora Welty, a strange combination. And a strange combination of "experiences" for Dee, who's heard both of them read. These experiences somehow get him started on the differences between fact and fiction, and also between parable and resurrection. On the one hand, we don't care if "the mustard seed is *not* the smallest of

seeds.” On the other hand, if the resurrection has only a “spiritual” meaning, we wouldn’t get up for Easter morning service, or any other Sunday morning for that matter.

Gathering at Table

Julie is wondering—and thinking how wonderful it is—that Passover and Maundy Thursday overlap this year. She thinks of the Seder meal she has celebrated with friends and Maundy Thursday communion. She thinks of “freedom and redemption,” how we “are held captive by unhealthy patterns, the grip of sin and the curse of death,” and how we may be set free!

Enduring the Moment

Gerald considers our desire to set ourselves free, how Americans assume that every difficulty is a problem to be solved. But, what if that is not the case? In world affairs, for example, do we always have to intervene? (He recalls Congolese saying to him, “Your unsolicited advice isn’t always the most valued aspect of your presence.” On a personal level, can we live with the fact that some of our “problems” may not have solutions? Maybe not, if we’re the type that would come to Jesus in the garden praying “Not my will . . .” and interrupt, “Wait a minute. There’s a solution here, I know.”

APRIL 13 “Bad Friday” Thoughts

Ever the cynic, Rick wonders about those people who when they’re feeling bad are perked up by the misfortunes of others, because (they say) it makes them realize how fortunate they are. They must love good Friday: it’s not them battered, beaten, bruised, hanging there. On the other hand, there are those who seem to feel the weight of the world on their shoulders. Are they any better off, trying to “outjesus Jesus”? Ever the cynic . . .

APRIL 17 Seeing Green

Lynn invites us to a random Easter Monday in which theologians compete with biblical scholars for TV time as Wyoming turns green and her eyes adjust to spring, her heart to new life.

APRIL 18 Happy Hour of Prayer

Dee puts on his Mr. Wizard lab coat to examine recent scientific studies about the efficacy of intercessory prayer. The evidence is mixed. So what? “Science is interested in cures,” but “faith is interested in healing” or *shalom*, which cannot be measured. Science is interested in what we get—*that we can see*. Prayer is about our desire to “get” God, that God’s will be done “on earth (today, here) as it is in heaven.” Amen.

APRIL 19 Dare We Ask?

Julie considers that desire—our deep longing for God, but our desires for the world we live in and for ourselves as well. How do we see these clearly and understand them, so we can bring them into the light of God’s love? For only then can we say to God, “This thing that I long for is that what You long for, too?” Amen again.

APRIL 23 Traveling Underground, or Pathetic Fallacy

Gerald loses his essay of the week somewhere in cyberspace, unless Rick lost it on his behalf. At any rate, he (Rick) feels guilty, so he goes off looking. He doesn’t get back until Sunday. Then, he wonders if we really do long for God. We’d like to think we do, but we don’t. We eat the fruit, and we hide ourselves . . . from all potentially uncomfortable encounters. We take off, not much wanting to talk with our brothers and sisters either.

APRIL 26 The Day of Days

Lynn takes a couple of weeks off. Dee soldiers on, even if he’s caught somewhere in the past, though not too-far-distant. He’s still thinking, though, about Easter, especially the “full throttle, pin your ears back, kick in the pants” service they had at Anchorage. Made the following Sunday look a little, well, less. So what do we do? Do we go rockem-sockem every Sunday, or . . . He’s just wondering.

APRIL 27

Children of Royalty

Julie wonders, too. On the one hand she thinks we need to celebrate the Lord's Day with all joy and wonder. On the other hand, she becomes concerned "with praise services that only celebrate the exuberance of resurrection" and forget the everyday. Maybe we should worship . . . every day as well as try to find a balance between "the joy of kingdom come and the reality of sorrow and suffering not done."

MAY 03

Reduction in Force

Lynn's vacation continues. Dee continues on, wondering now, however, not about worship but about denominations and I don't mean five-, ten-, and twenty-dollar bills. I mean bills and overtures and Books of Order and bureaucracy and paper and what-all. There must be a better way of coming together. What would it look like if we gave it *all* up—at the national and regional level—and started again from the ground up? Would we have a movement . . . like in Acts?

MAY 05

All Over the Map

Rick continues getting lost. He's on the road again—Virginia, West Virginia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Maryland, West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina—wondering about joy, and happiness, and pleasure, and what makes one not the other. He really *is* on the road; and he's not getting anywhere either.

MAY 08

Snow in May?!

On Monday Lynn returns—from full-blown Kentucky spring—coming home to six inches of snow. Home! Her Wyoming exile is over, but not because she's left her new place, rather because that place has become home. "The sight of [May] snow on crab apple blossoms . . . set my heart to singing."

MAY 10

More than Liquid Soap!

Speaking of singing. On Wednesday Julie writes both TV jingles—selling luxury cars to the tune of *'Tis a gift to be simple*—and of joy. Particularly she writes of joy, which she suggests we wear this Eastertide, more than happiness, a gift of God beautiful, deep, and abiding.

MAY 11

Arms wide open, I've run a twisted line

Speaking of coming home: On Thursday Gerald thinks of returning to American culture after having been away some time in Africa. It's hard to get "back in the groove," which includes the likes of Howard Stern and Terry Gross, historian Douglas Brinkley and singer Willie Nelson. Actually, there are connections. Terry Gross is a big Howard Stern fan, and Brinkley loves Willie Nelson, particularly "The Maker," which Gerald is now turned onto, too. When you have a chance, take a listen.

MAY 13

My Way

Rick also writes of joy, though not as joyously as Julie. But why are we unhappy—*all* the good things God has given us, not to mention Christ who died for our sins? Partly because we are unwilling "to experience a full range of pleasure. We write our own experience large; then, we become trapped in it. We become so convinced that God works in certain ways, our ways, that we cannot see—or hear or taste or touch or smell—that he's working in others as well."