

CHAPTER FIVE

Favorite Inspirations

THE LORD IS MY SHEPHERD

Occasionally in my column *Pause for Reflection* I have used titles that come with a great deal of emotional attachment, titles such as “When the Saints Go Marching in,” “Faith of our Fathers,” “The Lord is My Shepherd” and “Tradition!” Each of these has a song attached, and he who sings, prays twice. In this chapter I will share some of these favorite inspirations.

When the Saints Go Marching In has always reminded me of one of the most moving passages in Scripture that gives us great hope, the vision of John in Revelation 7:9–14: “After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.... Then one of the elders addressed me, saying, “Who are these, robed in white, and where have they come from?” It is with great joy that I picture many whom I have known in this world standing in that assembly. There are my parents, my father-in-law, my grandparents, two sisters, a brother-in-law, some friends from Canora who have passed on, and the list goes on. You can picture some who are there. These are the saints. Not the big saints like Peter and Paul, but ordinary people like you and me. People who believed and persisted in their good works, and were redeemed by the love of Christ.

I know I am a sinner. Some days I do foolish things. If you are close enough to me, you have seen my warts. I’m not perfect, yet. Some days I know the Lord must shake his head a little, perhaps smile

and say, “What’s he up to today?” Sometimes we are foolish. But the Lord has led us so far along life’s path that he doesn’t want to lose us now. Even when we lose our direction, he persists. Oh, did I mention? God talks to himself sometimes. It’s not meant to be that way, but sometimes we just aren’t listening.

How many times do we read in the Bible or hear a preacher say, “Believe and repent!” That seems redundant to me. If we believe, we will repent. The love of God for us leaves no alternative. As we grow closer to the Lord, we will naturally turn away from sin. We cannot go in two directions at once, even if we have two faces. If this chapter appears glib or flippant in places, I make no apologies. As we experience the love of God and grow closer to God, it will make us giddy. “Lord, I want to be in that number! When the saints go marching in.”

Faith of Our Fathers is a title that rivets our focus on what is most precious and has been carried in trust by our parents, their parents and their grandparents, and so on, in my case, back to Russia and further back to Germany. Sometimes we fail to realize that the choices we make about our faith lives affect not only us, but many around us and generations to come. My great grandparents came from Saratov, Russia, where they and their ancestors lived for over one hundred years. Before that they had come from Germany at the invitation of Catherine the Great to teach the Russian farmers western (European) farming methods.

I can trace the roots of my faith journey from Germany to Russia, from Russia to Cactus Lake (Saskatchewan), from Cactus Lake to Canora. Generation after generation has passed on much culture, language, values, faith, a way of life. The challenge is for this generation to succeed in the same faith transaction. Are we making the kind of choices that will beget another generation of faith?

The church today—institutional religion in general—seems to be having a real struggle. Sure, we all still find the church handy for weddings, baptisms and funerals. But too often it does not serve much purpose in between. The present generation is treading on thin ice when it comes to faith. Many of us still understand the rituals and ceremonies. Will the next generation have the same rich legacy?

Favorite Inspirations

Are our church ministers up to the challenge of occasional catechesis? Instructions once or twice a year? Is this generation so gifted that we can pick up and learn the faith of our fathers from such limited exposure? What about our grandchildren? Who is supporting the church they will need? This applies to both the financial matters and ecclesiastical structures. The answers to these questions are the same as the answer Moses gave the Israelites on Mount Horeb: “Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live, in the love of Yahweh your God.”

Tradition! In the movie *Fiddler on the Roof* the question is raised as to why young people should follow the beliefs and values of their elders. The answer is “Tradition!” This force binds us so powerfully that we will fight to uphold tradition and model our lives after it. My hometown Canora is a community rich in tradition. The older generation has faithfully tried to pass on language, values, customs, music, songs and stories. The annual Veselka Dance Concert is an illustration of what is great in tradition. Young lads and maidens are enacting the stories of life. Some are so young they fail to grasp the deeper nuances, but others shed real tears with the realization of the richness of the culture they are expressing.

I have the utmost respect for the cultural heritage of others. Sadly, many of my cultural traditions have been lost in my generation. My German ancestors lived in Russia for more than a hundred years and safeguarded their language, customs and religion while living there. It was because of their privileged position that they eventually were persecuted and their lands taken by the Russian people. To escape this persecution they immigrated to Canada. To make sure that this persecution would not be repeated in Canada, my ancestors decided to learn and adopt the language and culture of the new country. Much of the richness of these Russian-German people was lost in a single generation. The saddest aspect of this loss was that many of the values disappeared as well. Tradition and customs of a people deserve the deepest respect. They are tied to the profoundest values of a people. The language articulates the songs and stories that are the soul of a people. Tradition!

Where Earth Meets Heaven

One of the favorite all-time Bible passages and one which brings us the greatest consolation is Psalm 23, “The Lord Is My Shepherd.” At the time of death we can hope to hear the voice of the shepherd calling us. It is one of life’s great experiences to recognize the voice of a loved one. At a time of loneliness, the voice of a lover consoles, transforms us. How sweet to recognize that voice.

As a child I remember on occasion hearing my father’s voice after he had been away on what seemed a long absence. Today I realize it was just a week of Convention of the Saskatchewan Association of Rural Municipalities, but as a child missing my father and worrying about his return through a March blizzard, it was a great consolation to hear his voice. Specifically, on one occasion, I first knew of his return when I heard his cough from the back of the church. What a consoling sound that cough was, to know he had returned safely and my world was secure again.

In John 10 Jesus says, “I am the good shepherd. I know mine and mine know me...they listen to my voice.” Sheep will listen to a shepherd’s voice when he calls them away from the edge of a precipice, away from danger. They will follow his voice when it is too dark to see. To many of us the most consoling words in the Bible are Psalm 23:

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

He makes me lie down in green pastures;

he leads me beside still waters;

he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths for his name’s sake.

Even though I walk through the darkest valley,

I fear no evil.

At the time of death of a loved one, we hear these consoling words. Hopefully at the time of our own death, we will hear the voice of the shepherd when we are in the valley of darkness, right after we say, “Into your hands I commend my spirit.” But until that day comes, we have to accomplish one small task. We must learn to recognize the voice of the shepherd. Recognizing the master’s voice begins early in

Favorite Inspirations

life. It is experienced as a child when we hear the consoling voice of a parent when we are afraid of the dark. It is heard during youth when the quiet inner voice says, "That is wrong. This is the right path." It is heard as a young adult when someone says, "I love you," and forges a bond of trust and love that can withstand loneliness, separation and times of trial. A good spouse is a gift from God and a helpmate on the journey to the Father.

Daily prayer and moments of silence with the Lord can lead us to recognize the inner prompting and calling of God our Father. He sent his Son to instruct us and he sent his Spirit to guide us through this valley of darkness. We need to grow closer to our Lord through the trials of this life so we will hear and recognize his voice. What a great consolation to know that at the moment of greatest need, during the final trials of life, the same voice that led us to green pastures and has given us rest in the special moments of grace in this world, will also hail us from the darkness and lead us to the banquet table prepared for us. It will be a wilderness no longer. All suffering will be gone. Every tear will be wiped away.

WALKING ON WATER

There is a story about a Catholic priest, a Protestant minister, and an atheist who were out in a boat on the lake one morning talking about walking on water. Both of the men of the cloth were confident that their faith was strong and they would give it a try. The atheist believed that the task could be accomplished by using "mind over matter." The Protestant minister went first and made it all the way across the water to the shore. Next the scoffing atheist hopped out of the boat and virtually skipped across the water. At last the priest stepped out nervously, and sank like a stone. As his companions watched him struggling, the atheist turned to the minister and asked, "Do you think we should tell him where the rocks are?"

You and I need to walk on water. We do that metaphorically when we call out to Jesus as we are sinking in the trials of life. Saint Peter needed Jesus to pull him up when he tried walking on water (Matthew 14:31). We may fall as we learn to walk in faith, but Jesus is there to

Where Earth Meets Heaven

help us up and tell us where the rocks are. Saint Peter is an interesting study. In his failings he reminds me of myself in some ways. “Even though I must die with you, I will not deny you” (Matthew 26:35), he says. Then later, when things get really tough and he needs to stand up for what is right: “I do not know the man,” he says. Yet with God’s help and the infusion of the Holy Spirit, Peter does go bravely as a witness to Christ and is eventually crucified.

There are Gethsemanes in our lives, situations of temptation and trial: a loved one commits suicide; a son or daughter is alienated and runs away from home; a habit of drugs or sin takes over our free will. At these times we need to cry out to the Lord like Peter did and Jesus will give us the strength we need. It will not necessarily be easy. There are no magic tricks, no rocks to walk on. We will need real faith. That is what saved Peter in the end. It is when things are going well for us that we have a false sense of security and we feel that we really do not need the Lord. Like Peter, we need to learn from our sins.

We need to strive for a simple trust in God and to not put our security in our property and wealth. We often see news stories about earthquakes or floods in Third World countries, and we see life there at a simpler level. The poor often have all their belongings packed on their backs as they move to start a new life. We would need several moving vans to move all of our accumulated baggage. In Matthew 17:27 we see Jesus solving a financial problem for Peter. Peter was asking Jesus about the temple tax. Jesus told him to cast his net into the sea, take the first fish that came up, and in its mouth Peter would find a coin to pay the tax collectors.

Compare the story in Matthew with a modern inner-city church that accumulated more than two million dollars in a building fund for that day sometime in the future when they might need to build a new church. The church was in good repair; income was decidedly more than expenses, and yet the parish was hoarding a fortune, some of which rightfully should have gone to the desperately needy right in their own city. We need to ask God for our needs more frequently. At a simple, humble level we need to trust in God. The same Jesus who solved Peter’s problem with a coin in a fish’s mouth can provide for

Favorite Inspirations

our needs, not all of which are related to money. The poor, of necessity, trust in God. The more affluent tend to trust in themselves. Is it surprising that the message of Christ is more welcome among developing nations who look forward to the promise of the gospel: “Happy are the poor in spirit, theirs is the kingdom of heaven”?

Our struggle to meet the challenges of daily living is one that can be reduced to very simple terms. Life is a journey. Several years ago, I paused to reflect on a young mother pushing a baby carriage before her. As she walked down the sidewalk she was also vigilantly conscious of an older child also in her care, walking behind her. She was on one aspect of her life’s journey and doing a great job. She had purpose and meaning, but did she know it? You and I are on a similar journey. Our day-to-day work makes us responsible for certain aspects of this world. But there is one significant area of our trip we should not neglect, and that is the philosophic base that makes life worth living.

“Life sucks” is something we hear from some of our youth today. If we listen longer we may hear the rejoinder remark, “And then you die.” Poet William Wordsworth speaks of age “that brings the philosophic mind.” We need that. Life has to have meaning, be grounded in a value system, so we don’t end up saying: “Is that all there is?”

One of the problems some of us experience is that we are too busy to think. Especially when we are young, rather than internalizing life’s experiences and establishing a personal value system, we fill our time with CDs, the Internet, mp3 players, school, work. There is no time for introspection!

Usually, as we grow older, we sense that there is a deeper meaning to life. We want a spiritual dimension to give us meaning. In the play *Our Town* Thornton Wilder says that deep down everyone knows there is something eternal about us. The wisest men have been telling us this for the last three thousand years. Yet we keep forgetting about it. The good news is that, for most of us, life is long. We have years to grow out of our childhoods, to be prepared to assume an adult role. Then we have years of living as an adult, gradually adding a spiritual depth to our lives. In the Talmud we get the following words of

wisdom: “Old age is winter to the foolish, / Harvest to the wise.” If we seek wisdom throughout our lives, surely we will rejoice in the harvest of age.