



REFLECTIONS

February 14, 2021

All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.

Acts 2:44-45

Swings, Slides, and See-Saws

Whether real or imagined, faint memories of entering the first grade still stir fear-mixed excitement. Among familiar faces melded with many I'd never seen before, I passed through the school door into a new adventure.

For four enchanting years Alamo School became like a second home. Children I knew joined those I didn't to fill my classroom, the lunchroom, and the playground with new friends. We learned the "Three Rs" together there. And we learned about each other.

When I remember the playground today, I recall the recess bell setting off footraces for the swings, slides, and see-saws on a playground spacious enough to run freely and play other games. I believe that playground is where character was both developed and revealed. And on that playground, we began to learn how to manage our differences.

The swings attracted those with delight in the thrill of heights and the rush of air from speeding back and forth. There were those neighboring swings, but except for an occasional helpful push, there was little interaction with them. Swings seemed to fit those who found satisfaction in being alone and doing their own thing.

Slides provided a similar thrill, but sometimes while waiting in line for their turn, or when someone helped them after a landing went wrong, there were more opportunities for interaction with others.

Unlike swings and slides, see-saws require two people—two collaborative people. Each person alternates having both feet on the ground. When they thrust themselves up from that control position, control transfers to the other party on whom they then depend to return the favor. See-saw partners exercise trust as they alternate the positions of power and vulnerability. It requires the see-saw partners to: *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility considers others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.* (Philippians 2:3-4)

Is a lesson there somewhere?

For a short time, that's what the early church did.

You are the light of the world,

Richard +

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REFLECTIONS

February 7, 2021

**For you created my inmost being;
you knit me together in my mother's womb.
I praise you because I am fearfully and
wonderfully made;**

Psalms 139:13-14

Vocare—To Call

Buried somewhere in storage lays a scrapbook of my high school days. Besides a few small medals and mementoes noting a handful of achievements, there isn't much of importance there. Napkins from banquets I don't otherwise remember, photos from our Senior trip, and articles about the best football team our school ever had fill most of the pages. (I wasn't on it.) But one page is dedicated to a newspaper photo unrelated to those days. The photo captures only the sky and a few clouds. It is notable because the photographer captured an instant in time when clouds formed an unmistakable image of Jesus.

Think about it. A cloud-formed image sketched across the sky so one might imagine a voice from heaven say, "*This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.*" (Matthew 3:17) Or maybe in the wonder of that photo hearing Jesus say, "*Follow me.*"

Looking back today at the path my life has taken, I believe Jesus must have led me down it. I see now the many stops and turns we made along the way, the institutions that taught me, the jobs that fed me, the bosses who trained me, and the people and happenings that introduced me to life's realities. And they all finally led me to the place where I could see for the first time how fully my travels prepared me for my calling—*vocare*.

Frederick Buechner explained *vocare*, "[as] the place where your deep gladness and the world's great hunger meet."¹ Or like the composers wrote, I found "The Wind Beneath My Wings." *Reflections* dated March 26, 2006 describes the wind as "the passion of your heart and that's what makes you fly." So, when I discovered how God intended my giftedness to serve Him in my work *and* in my personal life, I found my calling. Then like Dorothy searching for home in the *Wizard of Oz*, I discovered I had been there all along.

Now, about adding the photo of a cloud-sketched Jesus to my scrapbook, I don't recall my thoughts then. But I believe I saved it because I felt Jesus calling *me*. Then unknowingly, I followed him down the path to the *vocation* God planned for me before the world began.

So, if you're wondering now why I felt called to tell you my story. It's not because it's my story. It's because Buechner said if I tell it right, you may find in it a bit of your story too.²

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¹ Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark*, New York: Seabury, 1969; San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985

² Frederick Buechner, *Telling Secrets*, San Francisco; Harper & Row, 1991

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Your comments are welcomed and encouraged. Richard may be reached at richard@reflectingthesavior.org.



REFLECTIONS

January 31, 2021

In everything set them an example by doing what is good. In your teaching show integrity, seriousness and soundness of speech that cannot be condemned

Titus 2:7-8

Show and Tell

Imagine yourself left alone by your mentor with an assignment you feel ill prepared to perform. Then, grasping for help, you rip open a letter from him that reads:

The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished... and he follows with a long list of things you must teach. (Titus 1:5-9)

“But I’m no teacher!” you cry. Only you are! We all are.

God built into us a heart that beats, lungs that breathe, a brain that thinks and senses to guide us toward preservation. And we don’t need to do much to make them work. But for most other needs we need a teacher—and we are tapped for the job. *Train a child in the way he should go*, the proverb reads. And that’s only for starters.

Some form of the word *teach*, appears about 400 times in the NIV Bible. And when the various synonyms like *train* and *instruct* are added, the tally reaches well over 500. And those words don’t include teaching methods like write, preach, and explain. Nor does the count include perhaps the most important of all—*show*.

Show me your ways, O Lord, / teach me your paths (Psalms 25:4) ... *you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again.* (Hebrews 5:12) It’s Show and Tell.

We are all called to teach, but it may be all for naught unless we also show it too.

Each of us teach life lessons to the many whose paths we cross in our lifetimes. Behavior reveals both the principles we hold dear and the temptations that draw us from them. And the balance between the good and evil practices we display will define the legacy we leave in this world. The enduring lessons we teach are not from the words we speak or directions we give. Enduring lessons come from the teachings we live.

Teach them the decrees and laws, and show them the way to live and the duties they are to perform. (Exodus 18:20) Jesus did.

Jesus went [about,] teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. (Matthew 4:23-24)

"The most important [command] is this: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." (Mark 12:29-31)

Because God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, Jesus chose obedience. (John 3:16) And because Jesus loved us, he chose the cross.

Show and Tell. It’s the lesson Jesus showed us. And what Paul asked Titus to do.

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REFLECTIONS

January 24, 2021

**Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.
Love the Lord your God with all your heart and
with all your soul and with all your strength.**

Deuteronomy 6:4-5

The Shema

Moses delivered it. Jesus affirmed it. An early church lived it—at least for a while.

The Shema summarized God's expectation for mankind. *"Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates.* (Deuteronomy 6:6-9)

Jesus affirmed it. *"The most important [command,]"* answered Jesus, *"is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.'" He added: "The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."* (Mark 12:29-31)

On Pentecost Peter warned and pleaded with the people, *"Save yourselves from this corrupt generation."* *Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. ... All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved. (Acts 2:40-47)

The Shema, is there a better example? They placed God first; and loved their neighbor. But can anyone live their entire life that way? Jesus didn't remove the Shema. He affirmed it.

So, here we are: *"I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it. Who will rescue me from this body of death?"* (Romans 7:18, 20, 24)

John explained, *"This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us".* (1 John 4:10-12)

Thanks be to God — through Jesus Christ our Lord! (Romans 7:25) We are forgiven!

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REFLECTIONS

January 17, 2021

**All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself
through Christ and gave us the ministry of
reconciliation...**

2 Corinthians 5:18

Ministers of Reconciliation

Paul, or Saul of Tarsus as he was first known, has been referenced in many of these *Reflections*. As a dedicated and highly educated Pharisee, he first purposed his life to protect and defend God's law as his teachers had taught. His purpose may have been well intended, but his actions often maligned it instead. *Love your neighbor as yourself* is central both to the Law of Moses and Jesus' teachings; but Saul's actions exemplified neither.

His horrific attacks on a movement of Jesus' followers called the Way built a terrorist's reputation. The reputation preceded his travels wherever he went, and repudiated Jesus' command to *love your enemies*.

One can speculate why Jesus chose to encounter Paul on the Damascus road. Jesus may have been attracted to Paul's competitive nature as suggested by his references to the importance of training and perseverance to athletic performance. Or maybe Paul's persuasive writing and speech made him a prime candidate for the job Jesus had in mind for him. Or Jesus may have wanted you and me to see how God uses sinners to server his purposes. But whatever the reason for Jesus' choice, Paul had a reputation to address before he could effectively do the job.

Words may be inspirational, and wisdom may turn heads, but no matter their allure, wisdom and words fall unheeded unless the speaker is also known to live them. So, Paul's reputation needed repair.

God uses wilderness experiences to produce a state of brokenness. Brokenness is the condition when one is unable to help themselves *and* is willing admit it. Examples include Joseph's years of separation from his family to develop his leadership skills; Daniel's months in captivity to formulate his prophecies; and John the Baptist and Apostle Paul had years in the wilderness to prepare their messages. But at least as important, to prepare to live them out.

God reconciled all of these to himself through Christ and gave them roles in the ministry of reconciliation.

Now today, doesn't it seem like a good time for Jesus to place such a call to you and me?

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REFLECTIONS

January 10, 2021

**My soul will boast in the Lord; let the afflicted
hear and rejoice.
Glorify the Lord with me; let us exalt his name
together.**

Psalms 34:2-3

Seasons of Trouble

He might have thrown back his shoulders and taken credit for his immense power and vast land and livestock holdings. He could have shown pride in his good health, loving wife, ten fun loving children, and servants enough for every need. But he didn't. Instead, Job looked at himself as a man blessed by God; and he never once removed his eyes from the source of it all. Still, he couldn't see the storm brewing until... Poof!

It was gone—all of it! His servants slain by the sword, his ten children crushed in a storm, livestock slaughtered or stolen. Disgust even replaced his wife's love.

Job's story is among the most difficult to read in all the Bible. But as tough it may be to read; it must have been excruciating to live. And God allowed it. Yet, even in his seasons of trouble, Job reasoned, *"The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; /Blessed be the name of the Lord."* (1:21 NJKV) And Job accepted, *"Shall we accept good from God, and not trouble?"* (2:10)

Seasons of trouble blow through everyone's life. Should we expect otherwise? Jesus warned, *"In this world you will have trouble."* (John 16:33) And to the Romans, Paul wrote:

The Spirit himself testifies with our spirit that we are God's children. Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory. (8:16-17)

Peter said it this way: *"To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps."* (1 Peter 2:21)

Job stood strong, *"I know that my Redeemer lives, /and that in the end he will stand upon the earth. / And after my skin has been destroyed, yet in my flesh I will see God; "* (19:25-26)

David too, *"I sought the Lord, and he answered me; /he delivered me from all my fears. Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame."* (34:4-5) And

The Lord is near to the brokenhearted, /And saves those who are crushed in spirit. /Many are the afflictions of the righteous; /But the Lord delivers him out of them all. (34:18-19 NASB)

Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a [huge crowd] of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders... and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross... so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. (Hebrews 12:1-3)

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REFLECTIONS

January 3, 2021

Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-18

Broken

Give thanks for the pandemic of 2020? And give thanks to God for allowing COVID-19 to change life as we have known it by causing death of so many, and placing the world in a broken state? It feels unnatural to give thanks for such brokenness.

One might agree that the word ‘broken’ describes the state of the world today. But it’s not the first time for it. The world first fell into brokenness when a sneaky snake convinced Eve and Adam to eat fruit from a forbidden tree. Broken. Then, to get their attention, God expelled the world’s first couple from the perfect home He had made for them.

Soon, mankind strayed again. Broken. God responded with a great flood. Then finding the Israelites broken in Egypt, God, through Moses, led the enslaved people to the promised land only to have them faithlessly refuse to enter it. Broken. And on and on the stories go—mankind drifting from God into brokenness and God restoring them once they turned to him for help again. Likely, events leading up to today will also make history—broken.

Broken is the state when one is unable to help themselves, *and*, willing admit it. Maybe that’s the reason Paul told us to *give thanks in all circumstances*, great and small, good things and bad. When all our efforts fail, and there are no other places to turn, only then do we turn to God for help. Paul did and he learned: “*I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong.*” (2 Corinthians 12:10)

God warned us not to forget: *When the LORD your God brings you into the land he swore to your fathers, to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, to give you — a land with large, flourishing cities you did not build, houses filled with all kinds of good things you did not provide, wells you did not dig, and vineyards and olive groves you did not plant — then when you eat and are satisfied, be careful that you do not forget the LORD...* (Deuteronomy 6:10-12)

So, dear God, we turn to you today. The world is broken and we, your children, are to blame. We try to fix it ourselves because of pride that wants to prove we don’t need you; that we are as powerful as you. Some choose to believe you don’t exist at all. But our efforts seem only to aggravate it more. And throughout all the years from that beautiful beginning, only our brokenness lifts our heads to you. Today gracious LORD, we raise our arms and lift our faces to you.

*And we discover then that reaching solely to you is all you have asked of us all along.
Amen*

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