

Sometimes things just don't go as expected. That can be a good thing at times. An example of this occurred when I was teaching college in 1981. One of my students knew I refused to date my students, so she proceeded to "introduce" me to other single women. I didn't expect anything to come of it, but I was single and thought "why not". The last woman she introduced me to was Leah Smith (some of you may know her). Leah and I will be celebrating our 25th wedding anniversary next month. Sometimes things just don't go as expected.

An interesting aside to this story is that after Leah & I married my sister, Linda Lafferty, married Larry Smith. So Linda Lafferty became Linda Smith and Leah Smith became Leah Lafferty. Some of you may wonder why I often look a little confused. Well, now you know.

Sometimes when things don't go as expected it isn't a good thing. Sometimes it's a bad thing. Many years ago now a good friend of mine named Philimon was having a very rough go of things. His girlfriend broke up with him, he couldn't seem to hold

a steady job, he had fits of depression, money problems, and eventually became emotionally unstable.

We had many talks, for many hours. I'd gotten him to see some professional mental health counselors, and they were successfully treating him with drugs and therapy. We had an agreement that he would call me, one of our friends, or the therapists if he felt himself backsliding, or just needed someone to listen. I was part of the support network the counselors insisted he have in place.

Things seemed to be going well. Then one day a mutual friend called. Phil had shot himself. He never called me, or anyone else. His death left me frustrated. Angered. I blamed myself for quite some time. But it also caused me to question.

What could I have done? What could I have done differently? So many questions; so many could haves; so many should haves. We've all been there; we've all asked the same types of questions. But with

time, study, reflection, and God's Grace came understanding, acceptance, closure.

There are many things I could be. I *could* be a better father. I *could* be a better husband. I could *be* a better *Christian*. We all have these moments of introspection where we take stock and critically analyze who we are, what we are, where we're going.

There is an irony in all this in that we tend to be our own worst critic. Part of this stems from the fact that we *are* honest with ourselves – I mean, why lie? I can tell myself that I could be the starting QB for the Broncos, but that won't bring Pat Bolen knocking on my door. That thought, and 5 bucks, *will* get me a small coffee at Starbucks, but nothing more.

That is not to say there aren't things we *should* do. I really *should* be a better father, I really *should* be a better husband, and I really *should* be a better Christian. And I try to work on these things every day of every week.

Self -analysis can have a downside though. Sometimes we get so lost in what we *could* be, in what we *think* we *should* be, in what we think others think we should be, that we forget, or even lose sight, of who we really *are*.

I truly believe that inside each of us is a good soul, yearning to be involved, a spiritual presence that cares about this world, that cares about other people, that wants to reach out to help save others.

We want God to heal our world and help those in need, we want God to be an active part of our world, an active part of our life. This thought is embodied in scripture: Psalm 27:13 "I would have lost heart, unless I had believed, that I would see the goodness of the Lord, in the land of the living."

So what is this yearning, this inner questioning, this *emotion*, all about? It's about *values*. It's about *moral* responsibility. It's about *caring*. It's about *humanity*. It's about *Christian Love*.

It's about the "me" in all of us that feels the eternal spirit move in their innermost being, the "me" in us that wants to live according to God's will, the "me" that cry's out in compassion to lost souls like Phil, the "me" that weeps with the sorrow of our collective spirit at tragic events like the Virginia Tech incident; it's about the "me" that lies at the core of our very soul.

One of the great things about life is the uniqueness, the complexity, the infinite variety of being. We are the microcosm that reflects this macrocosm. As with life, we are unique, complex, infinitely variable. We are *individuals*.

It would indeed be a boring existence were we all the same. Yet, despite all our individuality, we are also very much alike. We are all God's children. We are all intelligent beings. We are all touched deeply by tragedy. We are all touched deeply by love and kindness. We are all free.

The psychoanalyst Carl Jung called this journey of self-development *individuation*. It's the journey of our very soul; it's the journey of a lifetime. We are not going through life acquiring our wholeness, we're developing our inner wholeness. We are not acquiring our soul along the way, we're developing, and defining, our soul. We don't see God's hand in the world until we feel Him in our heart.

The beauty in this complicated process of self discovery and individuation is that we do have some help available. We are *not* alone in this journey. I'm sure many of you have seen the program "Who wants to be a millionaire". In that test-of-wit game show the contestants are given three lifelines. They can ask the audience, they can phone a friend, or they can eliminate two wrong answers.

Like the show, we have lifelines too. But, unlike the show, we can use these lifelines again and again. We can phone a friend. We can phone many friends. We can "ask our audience", whether that is a group at work or this very congregation. We can eliminate wrong answers by understanding

consequences, or by calling upon our moral character, our inner strength, our inner sense of right and wrong.

But our greatest lifelines lie beyond ourselves, yet lie *within* ourselves too. Corinthians 1:5 "For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also abounds through Christ."

We have the unique lifeline we call God's Grace. Titus 2:11 "For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men."

When you accept the Lord into your life, into your heart, His Grace will amaze you, help you, strengthen you, and possibly even save you. Timothy 2:1 "You therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Jesus Christ."

We have the lifeline of Hope, a teaching that Jesus shared with us, and gave to us with his ultimate sacrifice for us. We have the lifeline of God's wisdom

and guidance. And perhaps the greatest of all, we have the lifeline of God's Love. With lifelines like these we cannot help but win.

How do you actually access these lifelines? First and foremost, through prayer. In itself prayer is another lifeline – there is great power in prayer. But these lifelines may also be accessed through spiritual meditation; devotional study; religious dialogue with friends, family, or pastor; or simply by reading the Bible.

God is our lifeline. He is always with us. Isaiah 41:10 "Fear not, for I *am* with you; Be not dismayed, for I *am* your God. I *will* strengthen you, Yes, I *will* help you, I *will* uphold you with my righteous right hand." We *can* choose the right answer. We *can* be *ourselves*. We *can* and will survive hardships.

This is why God granted us free will - so *we can* be responsible for ourselves, so we *can* choose good, so we *can* choose to love God, so we can choose to let

the Lord into our life, so we can use this lifeline, so we can *be*.

Corinthians 3:17 "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord *is*, there is liberty." But the choice lies with us. The choice is mine. The choice is yours. It is our *responsibility*.

When I think of what I *could* be, what I *could* do, I must be realistic. But when I think about what I *should* be, and what I *should* do, I must be honest, caring, compassionate...and Christian. I must view it with an eye toward God's will. I must accept myself, and others, as being human, knowing that we are individuals that bear a great responsibility.

Our moral responsibility, our responsibility to the Lord, may lead to thoughtful self-analysis, but this need not lead to unnecessary self-criticism. I am not perfect. You are not perfect. We, as a human race, are not perfect. Yet, God accepts us "as is". God is not concerned about a small dent here or a little scratch

there. God loves us for who and what we are. God loves us as individuals.

You are a good person. God knows that. You try your best. God knows that too. Sometimes you fail. God understands.

But you must never give up your passion for life, your passion for God, that is a *lifelong* commitment. God *will* be there, all along the way.

Corinthians 13: verse 11 "Become complete. Be of good comfort, be of one mind, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you." God is your saving grace, your guiding star, your *salvation*. He is your *lifeline*. He *is in* you. He is *with* you. He *loves* you. Thank you Lord. Thank you. Amen.