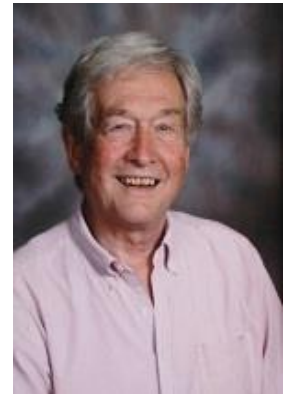


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Series: Worship Workbench
Issue: Essay 247 + May 2020
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GOOD ADVICE

- 1 I've told this story before: My wife Kathy was a Family Life educator and counselor all her professional life. She taught courses like "How to Talk so Kids Will Listen, and Listen so Kids Will Talk" and "Parent Effectiveness Training". She was terrific in her field. I still find strangers coming up to me in the street and saying, "Your wife taught me stuff that changed my life."
- 2 Anyhow, Kathy came home from a weekend conference one day with the striking results of a survey taken, I think in Europe. The survey examined the habits of long time married couples to find out what made their unions click. The survey examined hundreds of variables in these couples' relationships.
- 3 The survey's conclusion was startling, to say the least. Among all the variables in each couple's relationships, one stood out: Did this couple embrace and kiss before separating for work each morning? Or did they not? And did they embrace and kiss again upon re-uniting at the end of the work day? Or did they not?
- 4 That single variable seemed to make all the difference.
- 5 Those couples that did indeed embrace and kiss, morning and evening, had happier marriages, longer-lasting marriages, more fulfilling marriages, than the couples who did not embrace and kiss.
- 6 And – Get this! – they even were healthier, lived longer and made more money!
- 7 Now that statistic should not surprise every-Sunday church goers. What you do, day after day, week after week, has the power to shape you. To make you a different person. When you walk out the church door after a Sunday Service, you're a different person from the one who walked in that door an hour before. Maybe even a better person.
- 8 However, that was not the most surprising conclusion of the survey. Yes, the embrace and kiss made all the difference.

9 But – Get this! – It did not seem to matter whether or not they meant it! Whether or not they were totally sincere. Whether or not they were fully engaged in what they were doing. Even a perfunctory peck on the cheek worked its magic

10 (There are days like that, eh? “My heart isn’t in it. But I’m going to kiss you this morning anyhow because Jesus wants me to. So pucker up...”)

11 Now that should not surprise regular church-goers, either. There are days at worship when you just don’t feel with it, isn’t that so? When you don’t feel totally engaged. Maybe even when you’re weary or angry or out-of-sorts. But you do it anyhow. You stagger out of bed and go to worship.

12 And worship works its magic on you. Changes you. Ennobles you. Makes you a better person. In spite of how you feel. Actions first. Then feelings.

13 That’s the First great piece of advice from Kathy. 1-12 above. Let me give you three more.

14 Here’s a Second: A set of initials to remember: I-A-L-A-C. That stands for I Am Loveable And Capable. It should be the motto of every Christian. Of every human being. Kathy used to say every morning you should wake up, look yourself in the mirror, and repeat that motto. Maybe even do kissy-kissy to yourself in the mirror.

15 Most people – most Christians – suffer from a terrible inferiority complex. (For people like Hitler or Stalin or USA President Number 45, it’s probably an over-compensated inferiority complex) We don’t think highly enough of ourselves. Bad news.

16 In contrast, the Christian Gospel reminds you that you are Royalty. Luther reminds you that you are Christ. To your neighbour, to your family, to your community. That is Good News indeed. We should try to believe that, and live that, every day.

17 That’s one reason why I have spent a professional lifetime trying to dissuade worshipers from bowing the head, and folding the hands, and kneeling for most prayers.

18 Those postures and gestures come from the battlefield, and they’re the postures and gestures of defeat. You kneel in submission before your Conqueror. You clasp your hands together for the chains of slavery. And you bow your head and close your eyes – for your possible beheading!

19 Those are not the postures for prayer that pertained in the Christian community for its first four hundred years, as I have heard it.

20 For its first four hundred years, the followers of Jesus took their Royalty seriously. Following Jewish practice, their prayer posture was the *orans*: Standing erect like Royalty. Hands raised, palms up, in an acknowledgment of gratitude for the gifts of a gracious God rained down upon you daily. Head raised and eyes open, focused “up there” somewhere. Facial expression joyous and expectant. That’s how Jesus prayed.

- 21 That's the *orans* ("praying") posture. And it belongs to the entire Christian assembly, not just to worship leaders.
- 22 Sure, there are times and occasions when you want to abase yourself, to humble yourself, and to assume a posture of penitence. When you're confessing sins and shortcomings, for example. Then you might want to kneel, and adopt that defeated posture I describe in 18 above.
- 23 But most of the time in Christian worship – in Christian life! – remember that I-A-L-A-C. I've even imagined that motto as a vanity license plate when I owned a car!
- 24 Here's a Third piece of great advice from Kathy: When you're dealing with recalcitrant, difficult people, remember "Up until now". Up until now, this guy has been a royal pain. Up until now, this gal has given me grief.
- 25 You see, that "Up until now" gives the entire situation some breathing room. It assumes that people are capable of change.
- 26 There's always the possibility that people can change. Remembering that "Up until now" opens the door to that possibility. Life is not static. Personalities are not permanent. Nothing is etched in stone, never to modify. Never to...repent. That's the hope of a Resurrected life, after all. We die every day to the "old Adam", Luther would say. And we rise again to New Life. Don't short change that possibility.
- 27 Here's a Fourth and final piece of advice from Kathy's storehouse, and it's related to 24-25-26 above. Never use the verb "is" of people. The verb "to be" belongs to God, not to humans. It identifies an ontological essence that no human being can assume of another human being.
- 28 Instead, describe behavior. Not "Donald Trump is a liar". But rather "Donald Trump lied to us". You're safer, and likely more accurate, when you speak of words and actions and consequences, rather than motives or intentions.
- 29 You can never go wrong describing behavior. Leave the ontological assessments to God.
- 30 All of the above brings me to a fond recollection of my father, a Lutheran pastor and, like Kathy, another remarkable human being. He was capable of finding the single admirable characteristic in the otherwise most obnoxious and recalcitrant personality. My dad never said this in so many words, but his motto in life seemed to be *Philippians 4:8*.
- 31 "Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things..."
- 32 Life is too short to dwell on the negatives. Dwell on the positives.

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