

Trinity Christian College Chapel  
February 8, 2008  
Dr. John A. Bernbaum

"It Depends on Who You Know"  
Text: Jeremiah 9:23-24

- Thank you for the honor of inviting me to speak in chapel
- But this invitation causes some internal ambivalence inside of me. I was asked to share my spiritual journey with you, but I remember the words of one of my mentors, Dr. Richard C. Halverson, who used to say "Don't make a principle out of your own experience." In other words, don't assume everyone else has to go through the same experiences you have – your path to God might not be the same path for others.
- Yet, on the other hand, I have learned some lessons in 64 years, so I do want to share them with you, but with the understanding that God might deal with you in very different ways than He has dealt with me.

#### A Few Autobiographical Highlights

- I was born in Oak Park, Illinois
- Raised on the west side of Chicago until I was 8 years old
- Moved to Cicero, Illinois, when my father (in a search for solid Biblical preaching) stumbled into the First Christian Reformed Church of Cicero, Illinois, and said "This is our new church home!"
- Cicero, Illinois

Then the home of a substantial Dutch community

Then the home of a substantial Polish-Bohemian (Roman Catholic) community

The former home of Al Capone and his lieutenants

- "I'm a Cicero kid!"

- The move to Cicero was life-changing
- I was pulled out of the public schools and placed into the third grade at Timothy Christian School -- one of two non-Dutchman in the whole school!
- My name: Bernbaum

German name

Italian blood

Educated in the Dutch community

- "I'm a real mutt!" (little German, mostly Italian, but also raised around Wooden Shoes/Dutch.

- I struggled at times trying to figure out if what I was being taught was Biblical or Dutch. Sometimes I thought my teachers were not quite sure themselves!
- But I was blessed by what I received – and I treasure the Reformed world view that was ingrained through Timothy, Trinity Christian College and Calvin College.

### My Heroes

- In addition to my parents, who were committed Christians and who lived out their faith with integrity, the other heroes in my life were my Christian school teachers – teachers at Timothy, TCC and Calvin.
- I wanted to be like them!
- My goal when I was in college: Be a high school basketball coach and history teacher.

### Key Event in My Life: “It Depends on Who You Know”

- Shortly before graduation, I received a letter (not an e-mail!) from my Dad and at the bottom of the letter was a Biblical reference – Jeremiah 9:23-24. Do you have parents who do this? I never read these verses, except (for some reason) this one.
- Again, it was right before graduation from college and there were all kinds of questions about where I was headed next.
- Have you had the experience of reading a verse in the Bible and it just hits you with enormous power – that’s what happened to me when I read this verse.
- God says: Don’t boast of your wisdom (I’m a college graduate!) -- Don’t boast of your strength (I’m an athlete!) – Don’t boast of your riches (Not a problem for me!)
- Brains
- Brawnthe big three of American culture!
- Bucks
- But boast that you know me – the Lord who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth! For in these I delight!
- I remember thinking: if my faith in God is for real, I need to invest in getting to know God better – and I need to forget about pursuing recognition for my intellect, physical acumen, or wealth.
- The issue of physical strength and athletic ability was a big one in my life. Art Jongsma is a friend I met in third grade and we have been

friends for over 55 years and we competed in every sport, but still remained friends! No more boasting about our sports!

### Mentors

- On my spiritual journey, God brought mentors into my life you really shaped me and to whom I owe so much.
- I have already mentioned my father and my Christian school teachers.
- But there were others: my pastor for 11 years (Dr. Halverson).
- My boss at the CCCU: Dr. John Dellenback and Dr. Myron Augsburg.
- What a gift these mentors were to me!
  
- Students, seek out mentors in your life! Ask older, more mature Christians to be your counselors. Ask TCC faculty and staff to spend time with you on a weekly or biweekly basis.

### Key Lessons:

- From the Reformed community and these mentors, I was grounded in a Christian world view that gave shape to my adult life – this was a treasure of great value, and you are the recipients of this same gift at TCC. Treasure it!
- Three key insights stand out in my spiritual journey:
  1. Identity: Learning the source of my identity
    - This lesson came through to me in a dramatic way when we moved to Washington, D.C. in 1965. The capitol city is a pressure cooker and power is the name of the game in this city.
    - In Washington, who you know makes all the difference. But I learned from my mentors that the One I needed to know -- to know better every day – was not political insiders, but God Himself.
    - I learned that my identity was NOT in my work – in what I did for a living!
    - I learned that my identity was NOT in who I knew who was powerful and well-connected
    - It was NOT in what I owned
    - NOR was it in what others said about me.
    - Dear students, we have got to get this right: Who am I? I am a disciple, a follower, of Jesus Christ! That’s who I am!
    - Do you know “Fiddler on the Roof”? I love this musical, especially the opening song where Tevye explains how the people of his village of Anatevka in Russia are like “fiddlers on the roof,” trying to scratch out an existence in this poor Russian village. How do we keep our balance on these slippery roofs? TRADITION (faith).
    - Then he says “We know who we are and what God expects of us!”

- That's leads me to my second point.

## 2. Purpose/Calling: Do you know what your calling is?

- One of my colleagues said recently that the two most important days of your life are the day you were born and the day who figured out WHY you were born.
- There's lots of confusion about this in Christian circles: I'm called to be a lawyer, a social worker, etc.
- It is critical for us to understand that our primary calling is to be a disciple of Jesus Christ – this is our identity! This calling we share with other Believers!
- Our secondary callings cover a whole range of roles: husbands or wives, spouses, fathers or mothers, workers, neighbors, citizens, etc.
- The challenge is to figure out how we can be disciples of Jesus Christ and live this out in all the other aspects of our lives – and here the Reformed community has so much to teach us. Thank you, John Calvin, and his friends!

## 3. Community/Relationships: To whom are you connected?

- You can't make it on your own – not in Washington, D.C., not in Chicago, not even in Palos Heights!
- We need the fellowship of others who know us and love us and in whom we can invest our lives, as they invest in us.
- You see we are back to the theme of "It Depends on Who You Know" – but knowing and loving friends in the family of faith is another way to learning more about God's love for us.

**BOTTOMLINE:** Living as a disciple of Jesus Christ is a very exciting way to live!

- Not always easy
- There's no promise of safety
- But what a joy to put your complete trust in Jesus!

In my case, who would have known that I'd wind up as a college president in Russia, living and working there for 18 years – sure not a part of my strategic plan. Who would have guessed that I would join the Foreign Service and then spend 20 years working for the CCCU?

Who would have known that when I was 32 years old, my wife and I would inherit six kids, when we already had 3? All under the age of sixteen!

Who would have known we would go through two cancer battles with my wife?

Through it all, even the real rough times, God was faithful and my life has been a great joy!

Identity: Do you know who you are?

Purpose: Do you know what God has equipped you to do?

Community: Are you grounded in a network of Believers?

If so, it's going to be a great ride – hang on!!! Blessings!