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Speech at Albany Prayer Breakfast

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Year 2000 Albany Prayer Breakfast

Albany, New York

April 13, 2000

C. William Pollard

Dickens once said: “It is the best of times and the worst of times.” Although this was written years ago about the struggle between Two Cities – one in England, the other in France, it may well have been written about today.

Our world is one of accelerated change and choice. During the last decade, we have seen the collapse of communism and what was the Soviet Union and the controlled societies of Eastern Europe. The free market system is alive and well in most areas of the world today, including China.

Technology has had a dramatic effect upon all of our lives, bringing change in the way we communicate with each other, but also increasing our choices to acquire knowledge and to purchase goods and services. E-commerce was not even part of our vocabulary ten years ago. Today it is not only a reality, but it is transforming the way business is being done.

As I reflect upon my own business, I realize that it has not been exempt from the impact of accelerated change. Over 85% of what we’re doing today, we were not doing just 10 short years ago.

As our choices multiply, whether it is represented by the remote switch for our TV or the point and click of the mouse on our computer, we’re becoming accustomed to quick response as part of the norm, and entertainment as part of learning. Our attention span on any one subject is shortening. We have the ability

to isolate ourselves from the needs and cares of others. We can increasingly live and communicate in a virtual world void of the reality of the consequences of our actions. Everywhere we look there appears to be an epidemic of violence, including six year old children shooting their classmates.

As the pace of change and choice increases, there seem to be more and more people who are asking the question: What's it all about? What does it all add up to? Is there purpose and meaning in my work beyond making money? Is there purpose and meaning in life?

As I raise these questions, I reflect upon an experience I had over a year ago. Judy, my wife, and I had the opportunity to travel to the Middle East and Eastern Europe visiting Jordan, Egypt, Romania, Slovakia and Hungary. The trip included participating with our ServiceMaster partners in Jordan and launching a new ServiceMaster business in Cairo. We also participated in the opening of a new business school in Romania and then met with several entrepreneurs in Eastern Europe who had started their business with the help of a small venture fund that we were involved in establishing several years ago.

We met people from all walks of life – those in positions of power and wealth and those who had no place to call home other than a tent and the desert floor. We were overwhelmed by the accomplishments and the wealth of ancient Egypt and were perplexed by what motivated an entire culture to be consumed by building great edifices to honor stone and wooden gods and house the preserved bodies of their former leaders.

The pyramids are one of the Seven Great Wonders of the World. They have lasted for centuries. We admire the skill and intelligence of those who designed

them and directed their construction. But what about those who built them – upon whose muscle and back was each stone laid? What was their life like? How did they prepare for eternity or the life hereafter? Who were their gods? Were most of them slaves? Were some of them Jewish slaves building for a Pharaoh that forced them to make bricks without straw – suffering and sacrificing – waiting for that day of Exodus – that day when Moses would stand up and say: “Let my people go!”

And what about the poverty and suffering of the present? Over 30,000 people today are living on or within the garbage dumps of Cairo. What are their dreams? Why do they have so little and I have so much?

And then there was the Bedouin family that we met on the way from Amman to Petra? We had stopped by the road to visit some children tending their flock of sheep and goats. Soon we were invited by their father to join him in his tent. The men were invited to the front of the tent and the women to the back of the tent. As we sat on rugs stretched over the sand and sipped tea from unwashed cups, I was reminded that his tent and surroundings must have been much like Abraham over 3,000 years ago.

For this Bedouin, however, there was no future to his lifestyle. The cost of his feed had outstripped the market price for his sheep and goats. The future meant that he would have to abandon the freedom of a nomad and move into a town or village and get a job.

He was a very gracious host. He even invited us to stay for lunch, but being unsure about what had gone into the stew that was cooking over the fire and with a schedule to meet to be in Petra by early afternoon, we declined and were on our

way once again. Was I too busy to stay and learn from this Bedouin and his family? Was my stomach too sensitive to eat his cooking? Did I care enough about him as a person – a person created in the image of God – to accept his hospitality and begin the process of friendship? If he had come to my house on his camel, would I have invited the stranger into my home, dressed in his robe and sandals and dirty feet? Would I have washed his feet? Would I have offered him lunch?

What is my responsibility to others – no matter how different they may be? How do I determine the values and standards for my life? What is right and what is wrong? Where does one go for the answers?

Hunter, a sociologist from the University of Virginia, in his book on the conflicts in our society, has called it a time of cultural wars, where the most fundamental ideas about who we are and how we are to order our lives individually and together are now at odds. His conclusion is that the nub of the disagreement can be traced to a matter of ultimate moral authority. How do we determine whether something is good or bad, right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable? He concludes that the division or gap in our society or in the world is growing. People living and working in the same community are, in fact, poles apart.

Now, most of us here today are business people. Our work is in the marketplace. Our job is making money. Can we agree on a source of moral authority for the way we conduct our business as well as the way we conduct our lives? Is there a standard of ethics that goes beyond what the law requires? If so, what is the source of that standard?

Our gathering today for prayer is a statement that there is a God – a source for ultimate moral authority, a source for determining what is right and wrong - in business, in government and yes, in our personal lives and in our relationships with others

Recently, the Wall Street Journal had a feature article describing how business people were searching for God again. The author noted that a growing number of people in the workplace were seeking deeper meaning in life, but he also noted that most of them turned first to psychotherapy because they are embarrassed to talk about church or religion.

The author concluded that although the needs may be more spiritual than psychological, people feel like they don't have a convenient or comfortable place to discuss them. It would be just too nerdy or strange to talk about spiritual issues or needs in the work environment, and the traditional places of worship just don't understand the culture and issues of the marketplace.

So do God and profit mix? Should the business firm of the 21st Century serve merely as an efficient inter-production of quality goods and services, providing a consumer with what they want at a profit, or can it be a moral community to help shape human character and behavior – a community that is focused on the worth of a person as well as on the production of goods and services – a community with a soul – a community where it is OK to talk about the spiritual issues of life?

I am a person of faith, and I am a Christian, a follower of Jesus Christ. My faith, by its very nature, is a defined faith. Definition brings clarity and allows for

order, a systematic way of thinking and learning. Definition, however, also sets boundary lines, determines limits of what is and what is not. It can be exclusive, by shutting out those who do not believe the same way I do or fit my definition.

How then do I relate my faith to a diverse and pluralistic marketplace - one that is constantly changing? As a leader in business, and one who is part of the leadership of a public company that now employs and manages over 245,000 people, how do I integrate my faith and my work? Where do I go for the answers as I seek to bridge this gulf?

Do I redefine my faith to be more inclusive and tolerant and acceptable?
Water it down so as not to be offensive?

Or do I maintain the old separation between sacred and secular? Live a bifurcated life and accept the premise that religion and business just don't mix, and keep my faith a very private matter.

Or do I use my leadership to promote and propagate or impose my faith?

Or do I seek to live and share my faith in such a way that it can be examined, tested by my colleagues, and fellow workers and yes even be embraced by some, all within the context of a community that works together to produce goods and services and generates profits.

I have chosen the latter.

As a leader of a business, as a leader of a public company, it is my responsibility to see that we provide quality service to our customers at a profit

margin that will generate value for our shareholders. These are the transactions that make a business work. If I don't want to play by these rules, I don't belong in the ballgame. I'm also, however, a person of faith, and my faith is not something I can leave in the pew on Sunday. It is part of who I am at work on Monday. It involves a transaction – a transaction not with a customer or a shareholder but with God – a transaction that involved a change of direction in my life, a turning point toward God – a step of faith.

God's offer is to be involved in our lives, and it is available to all who will accept it, but it's like any other offer, it cannot be a completed transaction in a life of an individual unless there is a corresponding choice of acceptance and trust by that individual. When that choice is made, there is a hope not only for this life, but beyond.

It was C. S. Lewis who reminded us that there are no ordinary people. We have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations - these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat, but it is immortals who we joke with, marry, snub and exploit.

In a pluralistic society, in a world where there is freedom to choose, not everyone will agree with my starting point or the need for personal faith in God, but for me this is where I get my direction - my anchor in the wind of change and choice – my purpose and meaning in work and in life – my standard for right and wrong.

As we come here to pray this morning, the question is before each of us: Who are we praying to, and what is our relationship to Him?

It is the best of times and the worst of times. How shall we then live?
What shall we believe?

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