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Speech at Park Ridge Prayer Breakfast

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**Park Ridge Prayer Breakfast
Park Ridge IL
April 17, 1999**

C. William Pollard

We live in exciting times. In Dickens' words: "It is the best of times and the worst of times." We live in a world of accelerated change and choice. During this past decade, changes in the politics and economies of what was the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe and what is emerging in China have affected the lives of millions of people. Everywhere one looks, there is more freedom.

Yes, more freedom and certainly more choice and definitely more confusion. The restraints that suppressed the age-old conflicts of some people groups are no longer there. Both religious and cultural hatreds have come to the surface. The current crisis in Kosovo reflects hatreds and divisions that go back over 500 years.

But man's inhumanity to man is not new. Hatred, war, oppression have been common themes of history.

Last year, Judy and I had the opportunity to travel in 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 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 life really all about? What is my responsibility to others – no matter how different they may be? How does one determine what is right and what is wrong? Where does one go for the answers?

Some have described our period of time as a post-Christian era of moral pluralism where everything is relative, even in the meaning of words. As we have recently learned from one of our leaders, there may be even more than one meaning to truth. When is a lie a lie?

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. (story of answering machine)

Now, as I come to these conclusions, I do so not as a philosopher, educator or minister of the Gospel, but simply as a businessman – a businessman who is also a Christian – one who starts with God and one who has put his life and future in the hands of God’s son, Jesus Christ. And a businessman who is seeking to lead with my partner, Carlos Cantu, a fast growing dynamic service company that we call ServiceMaster - Masters of Service serving the Master.

We have experienced rapid growth, doubling in size every 3 ½ years for the past 25 years with revenues now in excess of \$6 billion. We employ or manage

over 240,000 people and our services are provided in the United States and in 41 foreign countries. We are a public company with our shares listed and traded on the New York Stock Exchange.

Yes, I live in one of those pressure cooker environments where earnings and profits must be reported quarter by quarter and where earnings and profits have always been up for the past 28 years. The shareholders Carlos and I are responsible to as leaders vote every day on our leadership. They have the choice to buy, hold or sell.

But the measure of my success as a leader is not just in the value of our shares or the profit we produce. It more importantly relates to the people I work with. We are very much in the people business – all of whom have been created in God’s image.

There is much about our business that may be classified as routine or mundane. We are often dealing with people in entry-level positions – unskilled and many times uneducated, and more often than not, unnoticed. We do such things as clean toilets and floors, maintain boilers and air handling units, kill bugs, provide maid service, and maintain and repair home appliances.

The task before us is to train, motivate and develop people so that they will do a more effective job, be more productive in their work and, yes, even be better people. This is both a management and a leadership challenge. For us in ServiceMaster, it is more than a job or means to earn a living. It is, in fact, a mission--a way of life. Our company objectives are simply stated: *To Honor God In All We Do--To Help People Develop--To Pursue Excellence*, and *--To Grow Profitably*. These first two objectives are end goals. The second two are means

goals. As we work to implement these objectives in the operations of our business, they provide for us a reference point for seeking to do that which is right and avoiding that which is wrong. They, in effect, define our missions.

They do not mean that everything will be done right. We experience our share of mistakes, but because of a stated standard and reason for the standard, we can't hide our mistakes. They are flushed out in the open for correction and, in some cases, for forgiveness.

While most people are ready to accept three of our objectives - to develop people, to pursue excellence and to grow profitably - it is the God language that usually raises the question. Is this appropriate for a public company? Is this appropriate in a pluralistic environment? For us, it's not a basis for exclusion. In fact, it's our reason for promoting diversity because different people are all part of God's mix. It does remind us and it requires of us a focus on the dignity and worth of every person because every person has been created in the image and likeness of God and has value and worth. These objectives place a responsibility on those of us who profess faith in Jesus Christ – to live our faith – to integrate our faith with our work.

So what is the role of one's faith in a pluralistic environment? As a Christian, my faith, by its very nature, is a defined faith. Definition brings clarity. It 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, what is truth and what is error. It can result in one becoming exclusive in their thinking - shutting out those who do not believe the same way I do or fit my definition.

How, then, do I relate my faith?

1. Do I try to redefine it to make it more inclusive, tolerant, acceptable? Water it down so as to be not so offensive?
2. Do I maintain the old separation between the sacred and the secular and live a bifurcated life and accept the premise that religion, business and politics just don't mix?
3. Do I use my leadership to impose my faith?
4. Or can I live and share my faith in such a way that it can be examined, tested by my colleagues and fellow workers and, yes, even embraced by some – all within the context of a community that works together to produce goods and services and generate profits?

I have chosen the latter.

God's offer to be involved in our lives is available to all and like any offer, it cannot be a completed transaction in the 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 for an eternal life with God.

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 and a world where there is the freedom to choose, not everyone will agree with my starting point or the need for a personal faith and trust in Jesus Christ, God's Son. But for me, this is where I get my direction -- my anchor in the wind of change and choice.

My life has not been a simple, logical, predictable sequence of events. God has chosen many different people and circumstances to break, mold, and develop me, and the most exciting thing about the process is that it is continuing. There are not answers to every question. In fact, in this growing relationship with God there will always be some unknowns. But, as I continue to choose for Him, my faith grows.

God has made each of us with the freedom to choose.

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