

# BETWEEN TWO ANGELS

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**Evangelical Lutheran Church in America**  
God's work. Our hands.

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There I was, enjoying my lunch, peacefully slurping my way through my chicken tortilla soup, chatting with my lunch-mate about the sorry state of the world, the length of the winter, and the embarrassment of the Minnesota Vikings, when the pocket of the gent at the next table gave a little buzz. As one semi-sophisticated in the ways of the world, I thought I knew what was happening. Another cell phone call interrupting a meal. Happens all the time.

Out of the corners of my eyes and ears I noted said gent excusing himself momentarily, reaching for his pocket, and whipping out his handy-dandy gizmo that did indeed look like a cell phone. Too big to be a pager. Then I saw him start to push buttons and all that and I realized what it was: the latest must-have thing for the important, technologically with-it person: his "Blackberry®."

For those of you who steadfastly refuse to get drawn into the eddy of technology, the Blackberry® makes it possible for you to keep track of your calendar, save phone numbers and addresses, make notes, record your expenses, polish your shoes, walk your dog, empty the dishwasher and — here's the best part — send and receive e-mail messages any place, any time. The buzz was a signal that he had just received an e-mail. As nearly as I could tell, he then took time to read the e-mail and, yes, reply to it from the micro-mini keyboard on the phone. His luncheon partner had ample time to finish her soup and spend a few minutes in silence reading the menu, considering the dessert she could have had, and, I am sure, feeling very important.

*The fact that I am inaccessible for periods of time does not seem to have interfered with the globe's rotation, the survival of my congregation, or God's ability to prevail by grace at the end of time.*

The Luddite angel who hangs out on my right shoulder was immediately appalled by this show of rudeness. To signal to your lunch partner that an incoming e-mail was more important at the moment than she was, that it had to be read instantly and responded to immediately, seemed to the Luddite angel incredibly gauche.

But the other angel, the one who hangs out on my left shoulder, chimed in by saying "I gotta get me one of them." (The left shoulder angel is not much on grammar.)

Those of you gluttons for punishment who have been visiting this space for some years know that I periodically amuse myself by railing against the advancements of

technology. Over the years I have lamented the church's dependence on copy machines, the notion that the computer would revolutionize the way we "do church," and the intrusiveness of the cell phone.

However, those of you who know me personally also know that I like to make a stack of copies as much as the next pastor, that I am connected by umbilical cord to my laptop, and that I do have a cell phone. I keep track of appointments and my address book and my to-do list and write notes and do simple math on a PDA® (Personal Digital Assistant), and regularly "hot-sync" my PDA® with my laptop. Believing in the old adage "Be not the first by whom the new is tried, nor yet the last to set the old aside," I complain about these new-fangled doohickeys for a while and then become a doohickey user myself.

### **Drawing a Line**

But here I draw the line. The left-shoulder angel will be denied this time. I'm not going to do this.

What ultimately bugs me the most about many of these innovations of modern technology is the notion that I am so important that I have to be instantly accessible at all times, that the world will simply stop spinning around in its accustomed way if people can't reach me by telephone or e-mail this instant. Seems to me to feed an exaggerated sense of self-importance (which, as I recall, is what sin is all about in the first place).

These things have a seductive power for those of us called to ministry. We tend to be people with a high need to be needed, a high need that becomes a bulldog requiring regular feeding. If "my people" need me so much that they have to be able to "get me" 24/7/365 (a phrase I detest), that's a way of telling the world (and myself) how important I am. If you are sitting with a group of your peers and your cell phone rings and theirs do not, it's a little one-upsmanship. "My people need me more than your people need you." So we love our computers, our cell phones, our PDAs®. They make us so wonderfully accessible.

Unfortunately, they also have a way of taking us out of the moment. My computer has a little bell on it that sounds when a new e-mail comes in. I know that there are times when I can be sitting at my desk having a conversation with someone sitting across from me and that little bell goes off behind me and I have to fight the urge to turn around and check the screen to see who the message is from and what it is about. I'm not thinking about the person I am with and the conversation I am having. Instead I am focused on the e-mail that might be there. Certainly the same thing is true with cell phones. If you and I are locked in a deep conversation over lunch and your cell phone rings and you answer it and have a dandy little conversation with the church secretary about how many bulletins to print for the 11 a.m. service next Sunday, you have given me a clear message that our deep conversation is not nearly as important to you as the church secretary's question is.

## **Taking Control**

We used to have a secretary in this congregation who believed that computers were but a passing fad, that sooner or later people would give up on these things and she could go back to doing bulletins and other things on the typewriter, the way she had always done them.

I'm not that foolish. Computers and e-mail and cell phones and Blackberry® devices are here to stay, and I think that is a good thing. E-mail helps me stay in touch with people and get messages back and forth quickly. I have an e-mail list for my congregation and periodically send out messages. As far as that goes, our church newsletter is now available online. The cell phone is great for staying in touch with my wife and when I am driving to the hospital and get a call from the church office that someone else is there whom I didn't know about. It makes me a more effective and efficient pastor. But some of us need to be learning how to have control of our devices rather than granting them control of us.

So when I am in my office any more, I simply leave my e-mail off for extended periods of time. When I am between appointments or even between tasks I check for messages, but if I am writing a sermon or planning a class or having a conversation, I won't even need to hear that alluring little bell. And my cell phone is turned off more often than it is turned on.

Here is the remarkable and humbling truth. The fact that I am inaccessible for periods of time now and then, that people cannot reach me every minute of every day, does not seem to have interfered with the globe's rotation, the survival of my congregation, or God's ability to prevail by grace at the end of time. Maybe you are more important than I am, and you must be available 24/7/365. But if that's the case, my friend, you're definitely doing something wrong.

I can live and prosper and enjoy life without the newest kind of PDA. On the other hand, I could also live and prosper and enjoy life with one of them. The ungrammatical angel on my left shoulder makes a pretty good case.

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