

Merry Christmas and/or Happy New Year

from the Black family

Friday, December 16, 2005

Well, the year is almost over, Christmas is nearly here, and time is slipping away fast. I'm about to miss my deadline for our 2005 letter, and I haven't even done one for 2004 yet. Hence my decision to rename it the *Semi-annual Holiday Newsletter*. (Yes, "Holiday." I'm not being P.C., I'm just never quite sure which holiday will be at hand when you finally get it.)

2005 has been a year full of blessings for us, though not always the kind of blessings you look and hope for. I'll deal with the most difficult thing first, which comes first chronologically anyway.

Many of you know that my mother passed away in February. It was completely unexpected and a shock to all of us. She suffered a heart attack in the night and Dad drove her to the hospital where she walked in unassisted. We thought she was doing reasonably well by the next evening, although she had evidently had a stroke during the course of the day. During the night however, she had a massive cerebral hemorrhage. After listening to the neurologists, we – my father and sisters and I – made the decision to remove life support early the next morning.

It was certainly a very difficult time for all of us, but still we see many blessings in it. First, of course, it was over quickly. It was a stunning blow to us, but we're all glad that she didn't have to linger in pain and suffering. Also, all of us had been able to spend some time with her quite recently. Just two weeks earlier she had celebrated her birthday at my home, and she had visited with all the rest of the family within the previous two or three months. Most importantly though, it had been only seven months since my sisters and I were able to spring a major surprise party on Mom and Dad's 50th anniversary. They never expected to see children and grandchildren gathered from around the country, especially after having left Susan and Erin in Tacoma just a few days earlier! Now none of us can think of Mom's passing without being reminded of that joyous and hilarious occasion. That is a blessing indeed.

(Having lived with this for most of the year, I find myself surprised at how difficult it has been to write even so little about it. I am very glad now to be able to move on to sunnier topics.)

This year also marks my own 50th birthday. (OK, maybe the sunny stuff will wait a bit longer.) Mindy, knowing how ambivalent I am about birthday parties – and downright venomous about surprises – gave me plenty of advance notice of this celebration. She woke me up Thursday morning and told me she had called my boss and arranged for me to be off on Friday, so we could, "run away together."

Now guys, come on. You've got projects, you've got deadlines, you've got more work laid out for you than you know how to do – and suddenly you're another day late and who knows how many dollars short, and all because she's sneaking around behind your back...

Well, I suppose I could have taken it better. As it was I pretty much stewed all the way to the coast. We dropped the kids off with my sister and went on to I knew not where. We wound up at a house on the inland waterway, owned by friends, on an island we'd never been to before. It was a multi-family unit and Mindy said she didn't know which door was ours, so she started trying knobs. (It was getting better and better.) The second door opened so we kind of timidly crept in. I didn't know what Mindy was seeing, but I was seeing signs of occupancy – stuff on the counter, stuff hanging on the walls. I was steeling myself to start making abject apologies, or maybe making my one phone call, when we

rounded the corner and I saw a room full of people. That was my first inkling that I'd been had, since the fact that the stuff on the counters and walls looked like birthday cakes and decorations with great big "50" signs all over them – and a high school picture of me – had utterly escaped me. (Did I mention it was *three weeks before* my actual birthday?)

Well, the surprise still wasn't complete. The folks I saw first were all friends from our old church in Durham, so it wasn't hard to come to grips with the idea of them driving down for the surprise. But as I turned to see more people around the other walls, it slowly began to sink in that I was looking at friends I hadn't seen in 10 years or more. Friends who had long since moved to far away places like Montana and Nebraska. And now they had come all that way to celebrate my birthday.

I'm afraid my reaction wasn't very satisfying for my friends. Going from sullen to joyous in five seconds isn't easy. Especially when topped with such a stunning revelation. They all just surprised me entirely too well. However, I was truly happy, and looked the part pretty quickly. We had a fabulous weekend together. This was a group that had become close in church, forming a Bible study group and

having many activities together, including beach weekends, so it was just like old times. Pancake breakfasts, beach trips, kayaking, seafood restaurants, Trivial Pursuit Night (*with* victory chair dancing), Sunday morning worship (largely to repent of the chair dancing). We all felt as if we hadn't been apart at all. We even had a warm welcome and an even warmer send off from a

pod of several dozen dolphins cavorting a few yards off our pier. I got it off to a bad start, but it wound up being the best of all possible 50th birthday parties. Especially since I still had three weeks of 49 to go.

And just think: in nine short years we can do it again for Mindy! (Although, her birthday is in December. Hmmm... Mazatlan anyone?)



Of course, what you really want to hear about is the kids. Megan is eleven now and spends much of her time being a mother's helper and babysitter for the twins next door. Only while we're at home, of course, but still, it's hard to believe she's getting that old. She traded dance lessons for horseback riding a couple of years ago, but the friends who've been teaching her riding haven't really had the time

for it so she may go back to dance next year. Christopher is still enjoying baseball and football, although he's taking a break from basketball this year. He's become famous for his push-ups at football practice, still going at it after the rest of the team has dropped out. He's done well over fifty on several occasions. Not bad for a nine year old. He and Megan are both still in home school and doing well at it. (With the conscientious application of discipline by their teacher from time to time.)

Cameron is five, and this is his first year in home school. He's doing great and enjoys it most of the time, although he does have to be reminded of the fact regularly. He's also been demonstrating a lot more maturity lately: playing well with his brothers, admitting when he's done wrong, learning to "like" more foods. Patrick, at three, grew six inches last week I think. He's a very dramatic character, and he's been taking up the slack in some of the bad habits that Cameron has been easing up on. Unfortunately, he is entirely too cute to punish. Oh, woe is us. (Why does the last child always turn out like this?)



They are all beautiful and all adorable and they all make us very proud. It's a constant struggle to be a worthy parent for them.

Mindy of course, still has all the work to do. Between schooling three kids in three different grades, chasing the fourth around in between assignments, managing her scrapbooking business and cleaning up after her whining, sniveling husband, it's a wonder she ever gets to bed. I'd resign if I were her, but she keeps at it and keeps her beautiful smile in the process. None of us deserve her, and the one thing we *never* forget in our prayers is to be thankful for her.

Dad has had some medical issues this year, which has kept us praying. God has been granting our wishes so far, and he is doing well. He had an acoustic neuroma, a small benign tumor around the auditory nerve, earlier in the year, which required a single radiation treatment with a metal frame screwed to his head all day long. I parked myself beside him in the waiting room and kept him company for the duration, but he claims he was the one having all the fun. His 90-day checkup showed just what the doctors wanted to see, so that's looking good. More recently he was found to have prostate cancer. But again, tests showed minimal spreading and a good prognosis. Surgery is not indicated and he is undergoing a treatment program now. We have high confidence in our prayers for that too.

Back on the lighter side, we enjoyed our semi-annual family vacation in September, in the mountains of the far western part of the state this time. We stayed in the vicinity of Cashiers and ventured more than a few miles away only twice; once an hour and half east to Chimney Rock, where the kids had never been before, and again about an hour and a half north to Dillsboro for a ride on the Great Smokey Mountains Rail Road. Aside from that we contented ourselves with a little canoeing, a little waterfall hunting, a little miniature golf; in general, a whole lot of relaxing.

Probably the best little adventure of the week was The Great Cashier's Sliding Rock Expedition. Mindy and I had been to Sliding Rock before, but this was a different one we'd never heard of. Evidently, no one else had either. We followed our directions and found ourselves heading down a very steep and very winding road which eventually opened up into a bowl shaped valley known as Grimshaw. It may be the most beautiful spot I've yet found. The road flattens for less than a mile and is flanked by a lake of about five acres beside which stands The Smallest U.S. Post Office, and beyond which rises a vast bald granite cliff. The rest of the view is tree covered mountains rising just about straight up. Here and there a house or lodge is visible, and more importantly, the odd for sale sign. I want that for my next change of address.

However, we had yet to find the Sliding Rock. Passing a man and his dog, we asked for some refinement of our directions and learned that we had come down the mountain too far. Way too far. We trekked back up and just as we were passing the tell-tale third bridge, which should have been the first had we known to look for it, we heard the faint sound of a babbling brook through the woods. We turned around once more and pulled off to the side of the road, realizing now that the site was actually quite clearly marked by a small spot of red paint on a tree. Not a sign; not a word; just a spot. Silly us.

We got out of the car and hiked thirty yards down the trail until we got to a clearing beside a broadening of the stream. The place was just perfect. Although near the road, it felt completely secluded; nothing visible but trees rocks and water. And best of all, it was deserted. We had it all to

ourselves. This was a far cry from the other Sliding Rock, where you step over the guard rail and wait in line with 150 other people. Another dozen yards up the trail brought us to the top of the rocks where we stripped to our trunks, walked to the edge of the stream, and stood. Boy that water looked cold.

Eventually most of us talked ourselves into it and sat down for the ride. Cameron was smarter, but the rest of us went down at least once. Patrick took a ride on my lap, with some persuasion, and we both had second thoughts after I overshot the landing zone and found myself in a good eight feet with my left hand where I'd firmly clamped it at the last second to keep Patrick from inhaling the water – on his forehead!

Fortunately he has a good reflex and didn't drown, but he wasn't entirely pleased with the outcome and traded me in for his mother at the earliest opportunity.



After a little while another family found the place (I don't know how, I parked the van right in front of the red spot) and we shared the place with them for a while before letting them have it to themselves. We headed back to our retreat having had a perfect little escapade, complete with minor injuries and all.

So that pretty much wraps up our year. And not a moment too soon. I seem to remember having promised last time to keep the letter shorter in the future. But here I am on page four again anyway. I suppose if I'm going to actually write less, I would have to also write more often. But then again, something tells me the quid would exceed the quo anyway.

We hope that you have all had a great two years since our last letter, and that the coming year will be even better. And whatever comes your way, we hope that you will have the faith to trust in God's love and plan. He sent His Son that we might have life. Shall we spend that life in fear and sorrow? Or in hope and joy? "He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6)

Finally, since I closed last time with a movie recommendation, I might as well make a tradition of it. The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe is fabulous. I couldn't have made it better myself. (Well maybe just a little better.) I could rave about every aspect, but I have to concentrate on its faithfulness to the book in both letter and spirit. If you have ever read the books, you will know them to be very literal, yet not explicit, allegories of Biblical truth, with this story telling of the gift of redemption through the death of Christ. The most remarkable thing about this movie is that that message is absolutely as clear and unmistakable as when it flowed from the pen of C.S. Lewis. I have no knowledge about the faith of the director, producers, or writers, but whatever their reason, they chose to be as faithful to Lewis' vision as was possible. And not only that, but it's a terrific adventure to boot. The centaurs are just amazing!

Love,

Steve, Mindy, Megan, Christopher,
Cameron, and Lili