

2/10/2019

May we listen with open minds and receptive hearts, so that your words may give grace to us who hear? Amen.

Many years ago, a young pastor was called, right out of seminary, to serve an impoverished little church in Tennessee. Although the church had been in existence more than 50 years, this was its first installed pastor.

The people had scrimped and saved to come up with the money for their new pastor's salary, and as a result had done little to decorate their one-room, wood-frame meeting house. They didn't even have a cross hanging on the wall behind the pulpit.

Preparing for their pastor's arrival, it occurred to them that they ought to have some sort of artwork on the wall. So, they had a contest, inviting members to contribute some sort of framed picture.

The winning entry was submitted by a young girl from the congregation, who had found a picture she liked in a magazine. It was a close-up photo of the face of a bulldog. Below the framed photo they hung a hand-painted sign: "Get a good grip on your faith and don't turn loose!"

Clearly, they saw the image as a sort of motivational poster, urging God's people to persistence. Yet, in another sense, maybe it's not our grip that's important. Maybe we're not meant to be the bulldog. Maybe that's God's job: hanging onto us, even as Jesus hung onto those hesitant disciples of his.

This past week, I travelled to Plymouth for a meeting with some clergy from the Diocese as well as Jim Gettel. It is a monthly meeting for 'Priest Developers' but not everyone there is in that role, however that role is defined. Some of the clergy, like myself, are new to their congregations. Some, like myself, are figuring out what their new roles are and where they and their congregations are headed. Each of us shared a bit about where we find ourselves in our ministries and personal lives. The theme for this meeting

was, "How do we see ourselves doing and being 'church' in a new way?" A couple of the clergy shared that their primary focus would be in the area of worship as their congregations already had a great handle on well-established outreach programs and needed no help from them in this area. Another priest like myself had just started.

I shared a bit with the group about where I think we are at as a congregation. We definitely have the smallest congregation of anyone that was present. But issues, not surprisingly, were common among everyone. The primary one being; how well do we live out our Baptismal promises? I can honestly say that this has been one of biggest issues that I have seen in any congregation that I have been a part of over the last 27 years of ordained ministry.

What I did share about Christ Episcopal Church, reminded me of the Bulldog picture. Many congregations who are searching for clergy, whether it be full-time or part-time are replacing existing clergy who are moving on for whatever reason. Other congregations make good use of supple clergy and are content with that, again for a variety of reasons. This congregation decided that you wanted more than what you had been doing for the past 10-15 years. You have taken a risk, with finances, with me, and like it or not, with yourselves. Rather than existing for as long as possible and keeping the doors open, you realized that although there has been a huge comfort level in things being done as they have always been done over the past 50 years, somehow, things needed to be changed in order to thrive. This can be scary and change within the Church has never been easy. Ask many Roman Catholics about Vatican II. There are some in the Episcopal Church who are still not happy with the 1979 Prayer book. And be careful when bringing up a new prayer book, which will not happen for several years anyway.

As I have said over the past few weeks, we all have a stake in this new venture. Each of us has a part to play and gifts to give. Paul has spoken to us many times this year about what is expected of us as followers of Jesus. He tends to

come across boastful, at times, when speaking about himself. Other times, not so much.

Paul sees himself as unfit and undeserving. He states; “Last of all, as to someone untimely born, he appeared also to me. For I am the least of the apostles, unfit to be called an apostle” (vv. 8-9).

Paul feels that his former opposition to the “church of God” counts against him. But he recognizes that in spite of what he was then, God reached out to him making him the new “creation” he is now. God’s loving grace saved him, lifted him up and set him on a new course, giving a new and quite different meaning to his life.

In verse 10 he states: “But by the grace of God I am what I am.”

Are we able to say this?

Obviously, we did not hunt down Christians and persecute them. We were never enemies of the “church of God.” We didn’t have a Damascus Road experience. We were never really all that bad.

On the contrary, a large percentage of us have been pretty good. We went to school, we got jobs, we raised children, we’re supporting families and we’re paying a mortgage on a house. We work extra hours if we need to. And when we can afford a family vacation, we go camping or on some sort of a vacation. If you are the New England Patriots, you get to go to Disney World. For the most part, we are doing what we need to do.

And we may think that we have accomplished most of this on our own.

Oh yes, we got help along the way. Our parents helped out if we got into a bind and perhaps good friends were right there when we needed them.

But, really, we got where we are by all of our hard work, initiative and careful planning.

How often do we say — as did the apostle Paul — “But by the grace of God I am what I am.”

The Bible has a way of straightening out our crooked thinking.

We think it is all us, but God reminds us that it's all God.

We are where we are and who we are by God's grace.

Do we realize how just a few things, here and there, would have unraveled everything? But for the grace of God, our lives could easily be a pile of threads on the floor.

And for some, life was a tangled mess. No meaning. No mission. No nothing — until the grace of God lifted us and set our feet on a different path.

God's grace saves us.

We also know full well about the mistakes that Simon Peter made several times over the years. Yet Jesus loved him and chose him to be the leader of the early Christian community. God does not choose the rich, the proud, the eloquent, the best looking, the most qualified, the strongest, the most confident, or even the bravest individuals to be the Fishers of people and bring the sheep into the fold. God does promise to give us the grace needed to do the job we have been called to. God's grace saves us and nurtures us.

And it is God's grace that empowers us. Paul writes, "I worked harder than any of them — though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me" (v. 10).

There is not one thing that we can do to earn God's grace in our lives or anything we can do to earn God's love. But as with Paul, we love others because God loved us first.

When I think about the nature of grace, this story comes to mind:

Former US President Richard Nixon is infamous for his place at the center of the Watergate scandal. He disgraced both the office of the President of the United States and the United States itself in the eyes of the world. When Hubert Humphrey, a former US vice-president died, Nixon attended his funeral. Dignitaries came from all over the country and the world, yet Nixon was made to feel decidedly unwelcome. People turned their eyes away and conversations ran dry around him. Nixon could feel the ostracism being ladled out to him.

Then Jimmy Carter, the serving US President, walked into the room. Carter was from a different political party to Nixon and well known for his honesty and integrity. As he moved to his seat President Carter noticed Nixon standing all alone. Carter immediately changed course, walked over to Nixon, held out his hand, and, smiling genuinely and broadly embraced Nixon and said “Welcome home, Mr. President! Welcome home!”

The incident was reported by Newsweek magazine, which wrote: “If there was a turning point in Nixon’s long ordeal in the wilderness, it was that moment and that gesture of love and compassion.”

Carter gifted Nixon with love and compassion. Nixon certainly had done nothing to deserve it. It was an act of pure grace on Carter’s part. When the bible speaks of God’s blessing it speaks in exactly the same way. Blessing is never a reward for good behavior. It’s a gift, a gift of pure, unadulterated grace.

It really doesn’t take a lot sometimes to love others as we ourselves are loved by God. We are certainly called to do so. I see the goodness in each of you and I know without a doubt that God loves you just as you are because that is who God is and now by the grace of God, we are to find ways to show that love to those around us. It is who we are.

AMEN!