

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen this glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁶ From this fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. *John 1:14, 16*

Grace upon Grace

As I mentioned last week, every time I go into one of our churches, I am struck with varied memories of working with them and witnessing their faithfulness. Yesterday I preached at Community Presbyterian Fellowship in West Covina, because their pastor Amy Mendez went back to Guatemala for a family wedding. In the service, we remembered the bold decision the session made to become a fellowship of the Presbytery, which resulted in them continuing to worship on their campus, while also welcoming International Theological Seminary and now three other churches with whom they share ministry. I saw some of the leaders who have been there for decades, the elder who spoke eloquently about the opportunity God had given them to make a significant contribution to the global church by partnering with ITS, and several people who have become dedicated members after their church in Baldwin Park church was closed (and is now becoming the place where 15 families will be able to own property in Southern California for the first time), but also the family of an African ITS student who is now interning there, and the gifted Indonesian musician who is now on staff of the church, as organist and church administrator.

I then went to have lunch at Filipino Community United Presbyterian Church in Azusa, now called Love Community Church SGV, who really live into their new name as a vibrant, fun-loving, committed, intergenerational family of Christ. They enjoy doing mission work in the Philippines but also with Habitat for Humanity locally, and are in the process of opening their ministry to people of multiple cultural backgrounds and sexual orientations and gender identities, with the very able leadership of Pastor Dr. Tracey Shenell. One of their leaders once raised the question of how to be a multicultural church without losing the identity and values and traditions of their Filipino heritage. This is a very insightful question, especially for an Asian church, because in my experience, when Asian churches receive an influx of non-Asian (especially Western) members, the new members are comfortable critiquing the Asian church, questioning if they are Christian enough because of the ways their church life differs from a typical dominant culture church. It seems to be the religious corollary to the stubborn assumption that Asian-Americans are perpetual foreigners—those of European heritage subconsciously assume that all Asians are new Christians, and too many Asians buy into the expectation that they will never “get” Christianity as well as the people who have claimed the Christian faith for centuries.

I ended the day with Capstone Presbyterian Church, whose ministry really does focus primarily on people new to the Christian faith. Nearly all their members come from mainland China, a nation that was never predominantly Christian, and even with longtime government restrictions easing in recent years, multiple surveys set the percentage of Christians in China at 2-4%. (For a nation as large as China, that is impressive, when one considers that Japan is still less than 1% Christian.) Capstone continues to work to help people with no cultural context for religion of any kind to not only live into the Christian faith, but in a foreign land.

On Thanksgiving, I went to Praise Community Church to preach at their annual Thanksgiving Day worship service, followed by a Thanksgiving lunch. I believe this tradition is one more example of Praise's strong cultural consciousness, as their rule that the Thanksgiving meal can only have American food (not even rice!) helped teach the church about a decidedly American holiday. This

intentional respect for culture has always made Praise a model of intercultural Christianity for me. I remember going to Praise (then known as First Thai Presbyterian Church in the USA, a reflection of their standing as the first Thai Christian church in the United States) as far back as 2008, or six years before I came onto San Gabriel Presbytery's staff. They were my first and best model for a seamless bilingual worship service. Now, Praise has several mainland Chinese members, a White praise band, a Latina choir director, and they welcome all of them with that wonderful grace that is such a gift of the Thai culture. They still do simultaneous translation (though now it's almost all going from English to Thai), but they now translate the sermon and print it for Chinese speakers. And on their screens in worship, the Scripture was shown in four languages—Thai, Chinese, English, and Spanish! What continues to impress me, though, is the way that Thai culture is still honored and used in ministry, and in their generosity they now share that cultural respect with the cultures of other members. People from all backgrounds are welcomed, and those who choose to can learn some lovely Thai traditions. I mentioned this to Love's pastor, Tracey Shenell, as an example of an Asian church that has opened their church to others, but has not lost their cultural roots. Grace upon grace.

Speaking of grace, this transition from First Thai to Praise came with the pastoral leadership of Peter Tan-Gatue, who is Filipino (and who knows Love, back when they were Filipino Community United). Peter has shown grace in so many situations in this year that he has been Associate Executive Presbyter; we are most thankful for his work and expertise and pastoral presence.

As I hope you can see, the Word does indeed live among us. I have always been amazed at the unique history and giftedness of every congregation, not only in San Gabriel Presbytery but all around the world. But in our little corner of Christ's church, we have some wonderful stories to tell. I pray that you find a way to share your stories, and to connect with other churches, that you may learn of their experiences as well. We are indeed blessed, that we may be a blessing to the nations.

May we continue to learn from each other, support each other's ministries, and love each other, that together we may continue to be a channel of Christian love to our varied communities, in all their rich diversity.

Grace upon grace indeed!

With Advent hope,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Wendy".