

July Remarks from Our Pastors

In their reports to Council each month, Pastor Gregg and Pastor Rachel conclude with some personal remarks that summarize the most recent period of their leadership here at Grace.

Senior Pastor's Remarks:

My devotional reading this morning really took me by surprise. The passage was [Joshua 3:14—4:7](#).

Although I'm quite certain I've read this story before, for some reason it seemed totally new to me today. Perhaps you've had an experience like that at some point, too. In this story, Joshua is leading the people through the final period of wilderness wandering after having been freed from bondage in Egypt. They reach the Jordan River, and Joshua is told to send priests to carry the Ark of the Covenant into the waters, and they will pass through on dry land (sound familiar?).

Of course, this story is meant to echo the original passage through the Red Sea, but this time, the Word of God goes before them, making their way, rather than a person (Moses). God's will makes a new way. I think we can benefit from this story, particularly as the people of God who are still following the Word as we make our way together.

In the past month, we have entered the season following Pentecost, during which we emphasize the kind of personal and communal growth that the teachings of Jesus can foster, if we are willing to follow them. We are intended to wrestle with his parables, week after week, encountering their challenges and their hope. We are meant to shape our lives according to the Kingdom of God, the primary point of emphasis in so many of Jesus' parables. This life-altering emphasis on that Kingdom is bound to lead us into (and *through*) waters that might otherwise overwhelm.

This month Pastor Rachel and I attended the Rock Hill PRIDE festival, an event representing God's abundant welcome to people who identify in all kinds of ways. The beauty of that diversity was on display throughout our city and, interestingly, this was a Kingdom representation where the church had to leave its walls to participate. We proclaim a Gospel so all-encompassing, so powerful, that it makes room for all kinds of people to receive God's forgiveness, dwelling together as one body, redeemed and united in Christ. Unfortunately, in many other congregations, intolerance is taught and the kind of diversity that we saw just a few weeks ago would be deemed an 'abomination' rather than an expression of the love God works in God's people. The people at the festival know this all too well, and consequently, most would be reluctant to ever pass-through Grace's doors, experiencing the way we are open to everyone.

Last month, I started wearing pins on the lapels of my jackets which reflect support for people of all backgrounds, ethnicities, and orientations. As many of you know, I often wear a clerical collar wherever I go, too. Something interesting has happened as people have noticed both the pin and the collar. I have been stopped – several times – by people who want to know what denomination I serve and where I am a pastor. During these conversations, every one of them has shared how they used to attend church but stopped participating when their congregation did not have room for them, or their partner, or their sibling. Church became a place of harm for them, not forgiveness, thanks to the perception that God's love can do many things but is somehow limited by a sexual orientation other than 'the norm'.

I go back to the story from Joshua, where God's will can hold back swollen waters (twice!), allowing God's people to pass through into an entirely new future. It leads me to wonder how people can believe that the same God who makes miraculous ways for God's people, would make no room for their *variety*, their *diversity*? God started off with one people, Israel, that much is true. Yet as the biblical story continues, as the Kingdom of God is more fully described, we see that this Kingdom begins to welcome people of all backgrounds, all ethnicities, all social standings. Jesus welcomes children, people with broken pasts, people who have already sold him out for a handful of silver. Indeed, the feast which Christ prepares welcomes *anyone* who is willing to dine, receive forgiveness, and live in the freedom of that Gospel.

God gives Joshua some interesting instruction for this river crossing. Joshua is told to send twelve men – one from each tribe of people – to grab a stone from the middle of the dry riverbed as they go. These stones will be signs for years to come of a time when God made a way for the people.

^{6b}[Joshua said,] “When your children ask in time to come, ‘What do those stones mean to you?’ ⁷then you shall tell them that the waters of the Jordan were cut off in front of the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed over the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. So these stones shall be to the Israelites a memorial for ever.”

I think we have stones like these in our world today – symbols, I mean – some of which evoke a wide variety of stories. For those of us who have always been welcome in church (like me), our church building itself is a symbol of a place where God’s grace can be found. Yet, for others, for those who do not know us, our building can be a symbol reminding them of a litany of rejection, condemnation, and perhaps even violence. The same is true of the collar I wear most days; I have experienced all kinds of reactions, each driven by stories that are recalled when folks see the symbol on my shirt.

However, by adding one little pin, in just a few weeks’ time, I have had multiple conversations with total strangers that I do not believe I would have been privileged to share otherwise. One pin. Another kind of *stone* if you will. One symbol, evoking the kind of welcome in which God might just make a way for them to cross an otherwise impassable expanse. Some might even cross the threshold of a church they assumed would just reject them like all the others.

To the casual, uninformed observer, a pin is just a pin; 12 stones are just a bunch of rocks. But, to those who know the stories behind these seemingly insignificant objects, they are reminders of the greatness of God, who creates in love, welcomes in love, and makes a way for all of us to flourish in the Kingdom.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Gregg

Pastor’s Remarks:

This month we are Striking a Match for Burning the Mortgage! Thanks to a matching gift from a Grace household, we have the opportunity to pay off our building debt by the end of the year. This opens us up to new possibilities in our 100th anniversary year and beyond, as we free funds for following wherever God is leading us.

The response to this drive has already been very positive! We had more than two dozen responses shared with us indicating where Grace members hear God calling us to go now freed from debt. The responses are already revealing consistent themes, which is exciting! When we hear similar ideas shared again and again in discernment, we can be confident that we’re on the right track. These responses will be guiding our leadership as we look at goals for 2023 and for Grace’s ministry in the long term. And Council, Stewardship, and Outreach are leading us faithfully by making their commitments first. As I write this, we are just over halfway to our goal!

What I think is most wonderful about this drive, though, is that it shows us God’s abundance, and the ways that abundance grows when we live into it. Our congregation took a big step 2 years ago in restructuring our outreach giving, moving to partnerships and offering sizable grants (\$20,000 total in each of the first two years). There was a time when we might not have imagined this kind of program possible, but we moved together in faith and gave in abundance. These partnerships have been a gift to our congregation and to our community. This generosity, and other abundant giving like it, inspired the further generosity of the Grace household giving the match gift. And their generosity is inspiring even more generosity throughout our congregation. It is extraordinary to see how gifts multiply when we trust in God’s abundance!

The Spirit is moving at Grace, through generous financial gifts, through thoughtful discernment of our congregation’s current call, and through excitement about what Grace can be for God’s people and our community in our next 100 years.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Rachel