

June 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:

Some lessons from childhood are deeply implanted into our memories. Still, many years later, I remember sitting in school during 'phonics' and learning how to spot a vowel. It's funny how something so basic can change later.

I remember watching my niece learn vowels. She learned to read with the help of these little sayings – stories, almost, about how two vowels 'go out walking' - somehow that mental picture told her how to pronounce the diphthong they create. It was so different from my recollection. I remember learning there were a handful of vowels. Back in *my* day, we had A, E, I, O, U, and *sometimes* Y. That last part always struck me as oddly conditional, particularly when I was hoping for some simple, easy rules. *Sometimes* you could have Y as a vowel. If you were *lucky*...

I've often thought that 'why' is fickle with respect to church, too. *Why* do we go to church? *Why* do we take part in this collective exercise of worship, learning, service, fellowship, etc.? If we invite people to join us in this endeavor, what is the 'why' – what *exactly* are we inviting them to experience with church? Or...do we extend the offer at all?

Oftentimes we faithful, trusting Lutherans let the Spirit do most of the heavy lifting that brings new disciples in the door. The Holy Spirit puts faith in our hearts, after all, so perhaps our words are not all that necessary. But then that same Spirit works *through* us, too, and we are reminded that we are called to *invite* to discipleship, just like the first disciples did. So, when we are feeling bold, when we try to welcome others in, what do we say? *Why* should other people give Grace a try? *Why* is church – God's church, and ours – the place for other people to invest their time, their heart?

Pr. Rachel and I just got back from Synod Assembly, the theme of which was, "I Love to Tell the Story". You can probably hear the hymn as soon as you read those words, just like I did. During this event, we heard from Mitzie Schafer, who helped train us to better tell the stories of what God is doing through our congregations. Schafer audits congregation communications, and too often, she finds stories about God's transforming power get lost amid the more discouraging narratives that focus on what we can't do or won't do. Is it any wonder that, without hearing what God is doing in the lives of the church, it would be hard to see church as a valuable community? We cannot lose sight of the 'why'.

Luke 9:51-62 is the kind of passage that tends to cause confusion or even leave us looking for a change of subject. Don't look past it, though, because here we see Jesus' commitment to the 'why' of his ministry. He is not deterred by a chilly reception. In one village, the people there were offended by Jesus; he was focused on *Jerusalem* and not singularly devoted to their needs. How dare the Messiah exist for a purpose larger than our individual needs, right? James and John remind Jesus that a good smiting is always on the table, but he declines. Instead, he moves forward, and does so with the intentionality – he knows why he has come. Jesus knows that some will not be interested in his message of a new Kingdom; still, he does not change course when his 'why' is only sometimes attractive. Jesus shows faith in the purpose for his ministry. And even when it is not popular, he keeps telling the story of God's transformative love.

This is going to be a focus for us at Grace, something we are all going to work on, particularly as we approach 100 years of being a congregation in Jesus' name. We are going to be telling all kinds of stories in the coming year, often remembering together that though *things* change in time (which can be hard), *people* change, too (which can be amazing). That change in people is the key to unlocking a more vibrant future for ourselves. We live in a world where the dominant stories seem to be broken bodies, broken systems, and broken trust. And yet, we *also* have stories of God's transformation – God's holy work, changing things for the *better*. This is the story of what Jesus has been doing from the start: gathering God's people together and inviting them to have their whole lives changed. We need to tell that story.

I invite you to practice answering that 'why' question yourself. Ask it boldly. Ask it often. Share the answer with others.

Together, let us start telling our stories in ways that make the sometimes 'why' a thing of the past.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Gregg

Pastor's Remarks:

This last 7 weeks our Connecting work has been going so well! It's exciting to see that this year's work continues steadily and organically – we're following the Spirit!

We've been able to meet 2 of our 3 Outreach Partners (the 3rd will join us in July). At the end of May, a number of members got to go into Place of Grace for the first time, connecting both with Palmetto Community Health Care and with a piece of Grace's own ministry that some didn't know we had. A few members signed up to help right away! Then last week, Rev. Emily Sutton was able to both preach and present, sharing stories and information about Bethel Men's Shelter. While attendance was lower that Sunday, a number of members participated in her presentation, and one member has already started talking about how to do a trial run of volunteering.

Our Young Youth & Youth had a "Fun Day" mid-June, where our kids from Kindergarten to 11th grade joined us for tie-dye, birdfeeder making, games, and duct-tape boat racing! The older kids helped the younger kids, they sat together for lunch, they played games all together, and they were supported by several of our adults. It was a lot of fun to connect across those two groups, and fun to see them get to know each other better.

On Pentecost, we shared the opportunity for the Extending Church small group, and had our kickoff meeting on June 15. This group will be making connections across the congregation, getting in touch with those who cannot come or have not been in a while to Grace physically, checking in and seeing how people are doing. I'm looking forward to how these connections will grow, as people get to know one another better and pastoral care spreads throughout the congregation.

We have many more connecting opportunities coming up and I'm looking forward to seeing how the Spirit keeps surprising and guiding us in this work this year!

Peace in Christ,

Pr. Rachel