

February 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:

"We wish to see Jesus."

In the Gospel lesson for the 5th Sunday in Lent, some people approach one of the disciples, wanting to see for themselves this radical rabbi. They want to experience his impact themselves, or at least to see it up close. Their desire is relatable. We all want to see Jesus. I am seeing the presence of Christ all around, amid what seems like the quickest Lent in my memory.

I have seen Jesus in the way each week more envelopes are coming off the ELCA Youth Gathering display in the Fellowship Hall. As each one comes down, we have the promise of additional financial support for the trip, and more of the picture of our group is revealed. I have been a leader for one other such trip – Houston in 2018 – and I can assure you that these experiences are powerful encounters for everyone involved. Seeing the way our congregation has been so supportive already in the fundraising efforts is a reminder that vibrant Youth programs continue to show us Jesus.

I have seen Jesus in the weekly Lenten events, where we encounter subject matter that is all too often ignored. We have continued to face the difficult reality that death is inescapable. Not shying away from that fact, we are able to plan for the kind of end to our lives that will give more freedom for us, and less burden for our loved ones. Each topic has much more to it than we can cover in about a half hour or so, but we try to provide an overview that will empower those who participate in the conversations. And in those conversations, I have overheard lots of good banter, with laughter resounding. Far from being something somber, dialogue about the end of life seems to enrich the life we are sharing together. In this way, I can see the willingness of Jesus to address the subjects (and people) that are overlooked. I see his boldness, his acceptance of death as a gateway to something more, and it encourages me greatly.

I also see Jesus in the way our congregation steps forward when a member dies. I am finishing these remarks just hours before we celebrate the life of Eric Schmidt. Eric and Louise have been members of Grace for almost 20 years, and they have been blessings to our community in many ways. The love and generosity they shared with others in that time now returns to them in the form of so many people who stepped up so quickly once news of Eric's death was shared. We posted a signup to help with the reception, and nearly all the slots were filled in one afternoon. Importantly, this kind of response is not a unique phenomenon; this is who we are as a church family. We step up, helping one another to bear the burdens of life, shedding our tears in grief, but always remembering that we do not grieve as those without hope. We remember that even death itself could not end Jesus, and out of his great love, death is not our end either.

We are nearing Holy Week. There will be worship experiences on Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, and an Easter Vigil opportunity in Lancaster, too. Each of these will recall stories, images of Jesus as he neared the end of his life and glorious resurrection. Given the subject matter we have addressed this Lent, I hope we are better prepared to see Jesus as he nears his end, perhaps appreciating better the way in which he was prepared to meet death. Seeing Jesus walk into the end of life with such boldness really drives home the unshakable reality of resurrection. It is almost as if, approaching the cross, he says, 'You haven't seen the last of me.' Indeed, we have continued to see him ever since.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Gregg

Pastor's Remarks:

We are in the midst of Lent, and in the midst of our Lenten program series, From Dust to Dawn. (If you haven't yet attended one of these Wednesday evening events, you have one week left, and I encourage you to attend!) We're talking about end-of-life – getting ready for it, having a plan, and leaving things well for your loved ones. This topic can start out uncomfortably, but the more we talk about it, the less we have to worry about. As we bring death and dying out from the shadows, the light of Christ shines and we see that it's not something to be afraid of discussing. In fact, it's a real gift, to ourselves and others, to have these important conversations long before we need to use the decisions.

I was going to be happy with the outcome of these evenings if we had even a small group attending each week, learning and growing together. But what I've experienced in these last weeks is that the topics we cover keep seeping out into the rest of the week, either directly or indirectly. I have had multiple deep and meaningful conversations about funerals, who they're for, and why we have them. I've talked about why we avoid speaking about death, how poorly our society handles grieving, and how important it is to acknowledge and care for the losses we feel. I've talked about how we support each other in end-of-life, in grief, and in finding ways forward. These conversations are holy, and I'm grateful that we're having them.

On a related note, I've been fascinated over the last several years to notice how much our children want to talk about death; we talk about death and heaven and where our loved ones are probably once a month, either in Children's Word Time or Young Youth. They bring it up – they're experiencing death, through pets and elderly family members and other areas of life, and they want to know more. If for no one else, it's a gift to be comfortable talking about death so that our children can learn that they don't need to hide from talking about it or having feelings about it. We are teaching them one of the core pieces of our faith – we don't need to fear death, because in Christ, through Baptism, we have already died to sin and been raised to new life – death has no hold on us.

I hope that this series ends up being helpful to many of us. And I especially hope that we don't stop the conversation at the end of Lent. Death and dying is part of life, and we should talk about it as we do any other part. And we can do that, with care and confidence, because we know that it is not the end of life. In Christ, there is more to come.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Rachel