Temple Talk – Welcoming All People
10-04-2026

My welcoming journey to this community of faith called Grace began long before I walked up the steps and through the big red doors in 2025.

In 1976, the bicentennial year, I found myself working as a counselor at Lutheridge. Working beside me we were Cindy Hext and Karen Caulder, two young Winthrop students who were members of Grace. I can remember as if it were yesterday how much they loved Grace and how Grace was a source of support and love for them.

Fast forward to the late 1990's and I found myself in Columbia singing with the USC Summer II Chorus. The director always invited community members to sing with the students who were earning performance credits. Sitting beside me was David Platts who would go on to become the Director of Music Ministry here at Grace for 10 years. It was David who invited my husband, Jerry, and me to Rock Hill for lunch at Thursday's on Main Street. Little did we know that one day we would be living a few doors down at the corner of East Main and Dave Lyle.

Fast forward again to 2024 where Jerry and I were in line for early voting and who was there to check us in but Anne Johnson. Anne and I both grew up in Cabarrus County in NC and we were both education majors at Lenoir-Rhyne. It had been 40+ years since we had seen each other and it was Anne who invited me to Grace.

Walking up the steps and through the red doors of this church was a relatively easy process for me if not a quick one. But –

- What about the seeker, one searching for something but really not sure what?
- What about the wounded Christian for whom the good news of God's love has been overshadowed by a theology of fear and a disapproving God?
- What about the Christian who grieves for the time when the church was the center of all life and now along with the rest of us is trying to figure out what it means to be church in 2026?

All visitors look for signs of welcome –

- designated visitor parking - check
- an elevator and a ramp for accessibility - check
- signage to help navigate the maze of this building - check
- name tags to identify people (if we wear them) - check
- a worship bulletin that includes the entire service – liturgy and hymns - check
- a mission statement that begins – *We share God's grace by welcoming all people …*

These signs of welcome are inviting and important; however, true welcome continues with connection. We are a people who are meant to live in community. Opportunities to connect with others are important. My story – Your story – God's story.

- Where do our stories overlap?
- What do we have in common?
- Where do we disagree?
- How has God worked in our lives to bring us to this place of grace called Grace?

I have had many opportunities to connect with you over the last year. One that stands out is a recent book study led by Pastor Hahn where we began each session with those present sharing Good Friday and Easter moments from the previous week. What was a situation that troubled our hearts? To which the group responded *Lord have mercy*. What was a situation that brought hope and joy? To which the group responded *Thanks be to God*. This type of intentional sharing helped me to build trust and solidified my connections to individuals here at Grace.

You may connect in other ways –

- A conversation during a potluck meal or coffee hour.
- Joining relational groups like Sunday school, choir, youth group, or LIFT.
- Participating in service projects like Family Promise.

So welcome begins with invitation; invitation leads to connection; and connection leads to response. This is where we enter the stewardship story.

- This is where we are reminded that as we move forward in faith *nothing in all of creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus*.

- This is where we are reminded that we do indeed live an abundant life.
- This is where we give thanks that even as we search for more permanent pastoral leadership, the mission and ministry of this congregation has continued and even thrived.

We are *rich* because of our connections to God and to each other. Questions are before us –

- How will we respond to God's never ending love?
- How will we share our time, our talents, and our resources to move forward in faith with our mission and ministry?
- How will we make Grace Lutheran Church more welcoming for each person who walks up the steps and enters the red doors?
- As we exit the red doors, how will we share God's love and issue welcoming invitations to others to join our faith community?

These are questions the Stewardship Team invite you to consider. As we enter this time of stewardship focus, may each of us prayerfully consider our response to God's never ending love for us and for this congregation. Thanks be to God.