

May 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 are just about ready for VBS. I am primarily referring to the necessary supplies and volunteers in that statement. I, on the other hand, am still mentally preparing for the week. You see, I am not a fan of VBS.

I love kids. I enjoy working with them, exploring their ideas and perceptions, particularly when it comes to conversations that engage their faith. The VBS experience is an opportunity for these kinds of encounters. However, VBS also tends to include a lot of noise, a lot of corralling the little ones, and a substantial catalogue of music that bores into one's brain with almost surgical precision, bouncing off the gray matter therein for weeks (if not months) to come. For these reasons, VBS is not something that I eagerly anticipate. All that might initially seem at odds with my being a station leader this year, where it not for one important question and its answer: What is the purpose of VBS? The purpose of VBS is for kids to experience faith – to introduce a seed of what God is like, who God's people are for them. Connecting with the purpose, VBS isn't so bad. There is power in connecting with purpose.

Have you ever been in worship and endured a hymn you didn't like? Have you ever been praying a prayer and halfway through, discovered its language was not what you would choose? How about this one: ever sat through a sermon so dull you thought it was going to need to transition into your funeral homily before much longer? Homiletical homicide is an underreported crime – coroners are often too polite when they see yet another well-meaning Christian who was literally bored to death.

I make light of these experiences, but I know I have experienced discomfort and dissatisfaction in the life of the church in the past. I know I am not the only one. Fortunately, these same experiences (short of one's demise, that is) can be ways for us to reconnect, rather than disconnect. We can use each as an invitation to reconnect with the purpose of what is taking place around us. The purpose of the hymn I do not enjoy is not to please me. Wonderful! The purpose of the prayer I would have written differently is not to garner my approval. Fantastic! The purpose of the sermon that I find boring or challenging or irrelevant is not to captivate me alone, forgetting all other listeners in the pews. Thank heaven! The hymns are praise and prayer to God. The prayers lift the needs of the world to God. The sermon proclaims something important about God, something someone needs to hear. When I put myself at the center of what happens in the life of the church, I am bound to be discontent. When I remember that I am not the sole purpose of all we do as the people of God, I am freed to connect with the intended purpose, and I find the ability to cheer on those who are receiving what they need. This is, for me and for many, one of the most important functions of VBS. It's a lot of work, but seeds of faith are planted, both in the kids who have the fun, and the adults like me who are just trying to make it through the week.

In the Gospel story for this coming Sunday (Mark 4:26-34), Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God being like scattered seed, growing in ways unseen, benefitting God's people at the harvest. God's Kingdom is also like the mustard seed, which grows into an enormous shrub, which might seem insignificant to many. For the birds, however, the significance is no small matter. God's Kingdom is perpetually extending to all those living in it – people and animals alike – exactly what they need. As disciples of Jesus who live out their faith in that Kingdom, we all take turns extending and receiving the limitless grace found therein. We plant seeds, marvel at the growth, work and rejoice in the harvest, then start all over again next season. It's work, to be sure, but the work is much easier when we remember the purpose of what we are doing.

You might not be taking part in VBS this year. That's okay; we don't all do the same things at the same time. I am confident, though, that you have yet to face your last challenging hymn, prayer, or sermon. When it's your turn, I pray you can connect with the purpose. When that time comes, I pray you remember all God can do with seemingly unimpressive seeds of faith, and how we can all rejoice when even a little bird finds provision amid the wonders of the Almighty.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Gregg

Pastor's Remarks:

Over the course of the last year, at the request of the Congregation Council, the Youth & Family Committee has been exploring the Reconciling In Christ (RIC) program and discernment process, to explore whether this might be useful for us at Grace. Five members of the committee took part in a RIC training course, "Building an Inclusive Church" to better understand what the discernment journey would look like for a congregation. After exploration, training, and discussion, the group recommended to Council that Grace would participate in this discernment process, noting that our congregation has already laid some of the necessary groundwork for this process organically. At the April Council Meeting, the study was focused on what being Reconciling In Christ is, what it is not, and what it would look like for Grace to begin this discernment. At the May Council meeting, Council voted affirmatively to enter the discernment process.

I'd like to share this with you as well – what being Reconciling In Christ is, what it is not, and what it will look like as Grace takes part in discernment – so that all members of Grace feel informed and invited into this discernment process.

What Reconciling In Christ is:

- A public way for faith communities to see, name, celebrate, and advocate for people of all sexual orientations, gender identities, and gender expressions in the Lutheran Church
- An ongoing journey of learning and growing (as disciples, there is no point at which we are 'done growing')
- An opportunity for storytelling, listening, and community building within our congregation
- An intentional choice for increasing our hospitality
- An exploration of who we are at this time

What Reconciling In Christ is not:

- A one-size-fits-all 'program' of steps leading to a determined end
- A decision made by Council on behalf of the congregation
- A quick process
- A one-and-done activity
- A process that can 'succeed' or 'fail' – faithful discernment of any kind is a success
- A program intended to change our congregation or force choices

What the discernment process will look like for Grace:

- A core team of members from various demographics will lead on behalf of our congregation
- At least 24 months in active discernment
- One-on-one conversations with members across the congregation
- Exploration of our congregation's history with conflict and change
- 8-12 months of learning opportunities, including book studies, movie screenings, activities, and more, created for a wide variety of people and interests
- Creation of a welcome statement
- An exploratory survey of the entire congregation, the results of which will determine our next steps
- Adjustments made to the timeline and activities as the Spirit leads us

There is much more information related to our discernment if you'd like to know more. I'd be glad to talk with anyone about this, as would our trained members. Reconciling Works (the organization that leads RIC) does have a website, and you're welcome to look at it. If you explore information further on their site, know this: every congregation has a different experience of discernment, and that is intentional, because no two congregations are exactly alike. Said another way, you will not find anything on the Reconciling Works websites (or the congregations connected to that program) that would be a word-for-word representation of our congregation's journey. Grace's discernment will be shaped by Grace and by God.

Many people may be immediately excited about this discernment. Others may be curious but uncertain. Still others may be reluctant. This is normal with all discernment and all feelings are valid. Our hope is that our hearts would all be open to what God is doing in and among us, and that we would all be willing and able to join in discernment together. Discernment is a holy task, and I am looking forward to this discerning time, along with the deepening connection it will provide in our congregation.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Rachel