

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:

We are one-fifth of the way through a holy experiment in which we worship together just once per Sunday at 10am. Together we are experiencing two months of disrupted rhythms for our Sunday mornings. Disruptions like this are relatively minor, but they are real. Fortunately, goodness and mercy follow us wherever we go, all the days of our lives, which includes seasons of disruption. Even when circumstances are new to us – even when they are painful – God is still present. God is still faithful, and capable of surprising us with grace, sometimes where (and when) we least expect.

Last year a video clip circulated in which Anderson Cooper is interviewing Stephen Colbert. Whatever one thinks of Colbert's comedy, his solid foundation in the Catholic faith is readily apparent. Colbert suffered tremendous loss as a child. At age ten, Colbert lost his father and two older brothers in a plane crash. That context informs the following exchange:

Cooper: You told an interviewer that you have learned to, in your words, love the thing that I most wish had not happened. You went on to say, What punishments¹ of God are not gifts? Do you really believe that?

Colbert: Yes. It's a gift to exist. And with existence comes suffering. There's no escaping that. But if you are grateful for your life, then you have to be grateful for all of it. And so, at a young age, I suffered something, so that by the time I was in serious relationships in my life with friends or with my wife or with my children, I have some understanding that everybody is suffering. However imperfectly, [I can] acknowledge their suffering and connect with them and love them in a deep way. That makes you grateful for the fact that you have suffered – so that you can know that about other people. I want to be the most human I can be, and that involves acknowledging and ultimately being grateful for the things that I wish didn't happen because they gave me a gift.

He never says words like, 'Christ' or 'Jesus', yet Colbert is bearing witness to the wisdom of the cross, the symbol upon which God was most human. This way of understanding one's own suffering is not *required* of the Christian experience. Nevertheless, for those who are open to the gifts of suffering, deeper connection is available – connection with God and with others who have endured suffering, too. Those with hearts open to the fulfillment of God's promises can look at even the worst experiences with an expectation that God will still prove faithful there. And in that faithfulness, God will produce something wonderful among those who wait and watch and hope.

In the Gospel text for this coming Sunday ([Matt. 13:1-9, 18-23](#)), Jesus introduces a parable about a sower – a laborer who indiscriminately tosses seed all around: on the paths, among the rocks, atop good soil. Jesus tells the crowd God works like that, tossing out the news of the kingdom in all directions, though it will not always take root and produce something in every person. Jesus does not complete the lesson with explicit instructions; he simply explains the varying outcomes and the reasons for them. The implicit lesson, I think, is one of opportunity – to make our hearts a hospitable place for the news of God's Kingdom to take root, grow, and yield fruit that will be a blessing for us and for others. One of the surest ways for God's Kingdom to do this is to be actively looking for its presence in our lives. To put it a different way, think about how different your day is when you know someone is soon to arrive, how many more times you look out the window, with expectation breaking the normal rhythm of one hour giving way to the next. The expectation alone changes our living.

Tragedy is a significant challenge for our focus on the Kingdom of God, but the truth remains, continually breaking through the pain of loss with reminders of eternal life. Yet as we endure the unexpected, we need not despair. God shows up. The Spirit breaks through in all circumstances, regardless of whether we were planning on its arrival. Christ is made known, again and again, in the breaking of the bread, among the gathered faithful, wherever, whenever they come to hear the word.

My prayer for you today, amid whatever difficulty this day brings, is that your eyes are searching for the gift of his arrival, and your heart is open to wait with others who do the same.

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Gregg

¹ Try not to stumble over this word; I don't like it, either. Suffering is not a punishment from God. *Job* taught that definitively and based on other clips in which I have seen him discuss his faith, I think Colbert knows that. I think he uses the word in a tongue-in-cheek manner. I think he is referring to the tragedies which *others* might describe as 'punishments'. If he means it exactly as it appears in the transcript, we can rejoice that God loves us and extends love to us despite our sometimes-flawed understandings.

Pastor's Remarks:

For me, these last few weeks have been full of connections with our community and life-giving ministries, and learning new things through each of those connections.

First, I was able to work alongside our Youth in serving several of our outreach partners. I joined with 6 of our Youth in prepping and serving dinner for and visiting with our Family Promise guests. I was grateful to spend time with these families, both to know them better and to learn more about the challenges that face those without housing. That evening, I learned about the catch-22 situation of housing and identification. One of our guests had lost their photo ID while moving to Rock Hill. Because they did not have an ID, they could not apply to rent or buy a place to live. However, in order to secure an ID, they had to establish residence. You can't do one without the other, so you're stuck without either. Family Promise was helping this guest find another way through this system, and they were hopeful to have a solution soon.

A few days later, 3 Youth and I went to Bethel Men's Shelter, where we worked with Pr. Emily Sutton to sort through donations. As we worked, we talked about what items are most needed and the volume of donations needed to keep up. We sorted and stacked and filled shelves and bins, but when we reflected that 35-40 men come through each Monday to receive the shirts, shoes, jeans, jackets, underwear, socks, etc, we realized how quickly these supplies would be used. This is especially true given that their clothes likely experience more wear and tear than ours would in similar amounts of time – consider how much more quickly your shoes would wear out if you walked to and from work each day, rather than driving. You'd need shoes much more often.

Later that day, the Youth & I were joined by Pr. Gregg for a CPR certification course, organized by Frances Stockley and led by her colleague. We learned CPR for adults, children, and infants. We learned how to assist someone who is choking. We learned how to use an AED, and where the AED's are in our building. While most of us will never need to do CPR, it's more common than I realized that someone may need assistance due to choking. Now, five more of us are ready to assist a neighbor in need.

Pr. Gregg and I once again had the opportunity to support Rock Hill PRIDE by serving at the Affirmation of York County booth during the festival. There were so many resource booths this year, that I wondered a bit if we would make a difference – but I was reminded of how important it is for the church to show up in a clear, affirming way when people came to speak to us. I was humbled by the number of people who told us they'd been hurt by the church but were looking for a new place, or that seeing us there brought them some peace. There were also a few religious protestors at the festival this year, and it was good that we could be a contrast to that version of Christianity, sharing love instead.

Finally, we just started our book study on "The Color of Compromise". As I've shared with the study group, I grew up in public school in the south, and the number of things we didn't learn about the racism and white supremacy of our country astounds me now. In recent years, and as we move through this book, I have been learning shocking and upsetting new things about what our history really is. But rather than feel ashamed that I didn't know these things, I'm giving thanks that I can learn them now, and do better. I am looking forward to what we might find ourselves doing to bring abundant life and freedom into a system that is so focused on limiting both of those things.

I hope you're also having the opportunity to connect with the community and with life-giving ministry these days. I hope you're learning new things, and that what you're learning is bringing you closer to God and to our neighbors. I'd love to hear about it, if you'd like to share!

Peace in Christ,
Pr. Rachel