

The Road Less Traveled – March 31, 2017

We had some unexpected and unwelcome excitement at the church this week. Late Tuesday afternoon a neighbor called to report that she had seen two boys spraying paint on the basketball court over at the Quad. Because of the diligence of our neighbor in reporting the incident and some fast action by our office manager Kim Watson, who managed to snap a picture of the two culprits as they walked away, we were able to locate the two boys and get them back over here to visit with the Parker County Sheriff's Deputy who responded.

So we had them. The question then became, what do we do with them? I was angry. The two boys admitted that they played basketball at the court often, in short, accomplishing exactly what we envisioned when we invested in the construction of the court. They really couldn't offer any explanation as to why they chose to spray paint obscenities on the court and in the grass surrounding it and then bust the can of paint on the concrete. And of course they had no concept of how much time and effort and money had gone into building the court in the first place. They were a couple of 13-year-old boys who found a can of spray paint and did something stupid.

But I was angry. I was angry that the very people who used and enjoyed the court had decided to deface it, for no other reason than the opportunity existed. In short, we built it for them, and they chose to deface it. In that moment, I was not inclined to extend the hand of grace. I wanted justice. I wanted them to pay.

But there was another layer to the situation. Under current law, vandalizing a church isn't a simple misdemeanor, it's considered a hate crime. And that elevates things to a whole different level for the two boys. To be branded with that is something that could potentially taint them for the rest of their lives. That was all racing through my head as the officer asked me, "Do you wish to press charges?"

It's a funny thing about grace. We tend to associate grace with the act of forgiveness. To extend grace feels like saying, "it's OK." It feels like we are giving someone a pass, often for some sort of wrong that has been committed. And to some extent that is true. But the unique characteristic of grace, the defining thing about it, is that it is undeserved. It's unmerited. It is offered without cause in the hopes that it will be transformative. It is a seed that we trust God to nurture and grow.

And so we offered grace this week. We opted not to press charges – though the case will remain open for the next two years. And, of course, grace doesn't mean that there aren't consequences to the choices we make. The boys were out there with their parents until dark that night scrubbing paint off the court, and they will be back later on this week to finish the job. The two boys will be meeting with our Board of Trustees soon to offer an explanation for their actions and explore what other types of restitution may be appropriate. And my guess is that things at home will be unpleasant for them for a while.

My prayer is that this event will be a significant one in their young lives. My prayer is that they will be shaken enough by what could have happened that they will think long and hard before doing something like this again. But mostly I pray that God will nurture and grow an act of grace, and two lives will be transformed.

In that moment Tuesday evening, my mind screamed for vengeance. My heart quietly nudged me toward grace. On your behalf I followed my heart. And now we sit back and trust that God will work. Because as a people of faith, that's what we do.

See you Sunday.