

November 11, 2018
Philippians 4: 4-8
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“Gifts, Graces, and Gratitude”

Good morning! This is the second week of a three-part series on gifts, graces and gratitude. Last week I talked about gifts, so you might be able to figure out where this is headed this week and next week. I’m using the term “graces” –plural -- as something different than the singular and unique grace of Jesus Christ. Although gifts and graces are terms which I’ve heard in other church setting, because it isn’t common terminology at Creekside, I wanted to be sure to define what I mean by ‘graces.’ I’m going to spend the next 15 minutes or so talking about graces, but I hoped to get us all on the same page early on. I think I’ve found a great way to explain it -- we’ll see if you agree.

Graces are not as tangible as gifts. Rather than money or stuff or skills which we can give away, graces are more about disposition, or ways of being. Of course, none of us exhibit these graces all the time, but they’re the kind of things we’d want others to remember and share about us. Graces are the kind of thing you would put in a letter of reference, or an obituary. And although letters of reference and obituaries are places which typically include some factual information -- such as Jeffery was born on July 2,1952 or I have been Cheryl’s supervisor for 7 years-- obituaries and letters of reference are also an opportunity to note and amplify positive qualities: ‘Cheryl has great people skills,’ Yes; ‘Cheryl is an incurable gossip,’ No.

I believe I have said from this pulpit before that I have threatened to write the eulogy for my own memorial service, just to be sure that the comments stay on message. Tim reminded me that memorial services aren’t supposed to work that way. I believe his exact words were, “We’ll say whatever we want, you’ll be dead,” which is pretty hard to argue with. Because whether we like it or not, our graces are

in the keeping of other people. It doesn't matter how compassionate we think we are, or if we have a really good reason for being unpleasant, graces are about how other people experience us.

Which got me wondering if there were obituaries out there which neglected to focus on graces; it turns out that there are. I'm going to read you excerpts from actual obituaries. I warn you that some of these are painful, and you can decide who these words are saddest for: the deceased or for the family members who experienced the deceased in this way.

Leslie Ray 'Popeye' Charping was born in Galveston on November 20, 1942 and passed away January 30, 2017, which was 29 years longer than expected and much longer than he deserved. At a young age, Leslie quickly became a model example of bad parenting combined with mental illness and a complete commitment to drinking, drugs, womanizing and being generally offensive. Leslie enlisted to serve in the Navy, not so much in a brave & patriotic way but more as part of a plea deal to escape sentencing on criminal charges.

Kathleen Schnuck was born in 1938 and married Dennis Dehmlow 19 years later. Two children came from that marriage: Gina and Jay. In 1962 she became pregnant by her husband's brother Lyle and moved to California. She abandoned her children, who were then raised by her parents. She passed away on May 31, 2018 in Springfield. She will not be missed by Gina and Jay.

Dolores Aguilar, left us on August 7, 2008. Dolores had no hobbies, made no contribution to society and rarely shared a kind word or deed in her life. Her family will remember Dolores and amongst ourselves we will remember her in our own way, which were mostly sad and troubling times throughout the years. We may have some fond memories of her and perhaps we will think of those times too. But I truly believe at the end of the day ALL of us will really only miss what we never had, a good and kind mother, grandmother and great-grandmother.

Emily DeBrayda Phillips: It pains me to admit it, but apparently, I have passed away. Everyone told me it would happen one day but that's simply not something I wanted to hear, much less experience. Once again I didn't get things my way! That's been the story of my life all my life.

It's painful to hear the bitterness in some of those obituaries. We, of course, don't always get to choose our life circumstances, but we do have some choices in how we experience the world and how we relate to people. This is what Paul writes from prison in Philippians 4:4: "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! . . . in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." And then comes this list in verse 8, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things." And those are the graces that I mean: those things which are true and just and honorable and pleasing.

So here is the challenge which I see with graces: first, we are to incorporate them into our own lives. By the grace of God, we are to live in ways which are true and just and honorable and commendable. We are to give our best effort to living lives that follow the pattern of Jesus Christ, the only person who was at all times true and just and commendable. Are you with me? Because there's a second part. Here it is: by the grace of God we are to rejoice in the the ways that other people are true and just and commendable. We have to display graces ourselves, and we have to affirm graces in others. Maybe this doesn't sound difficult to you, but it has been challenging for me at times. When I feel like someone has been unjust or unkind to me, my natural response is to magnify their faults: real or imagined. I feel more justified in my injury and my anger if they are just an all-around rotten person. And when I become invested in someone else being a rotten person, guess what it does to their response to me? Of course they become defensive and fault-finding, and the negativity increases.

There's a way to break that cycle, but it takes courage and resolve. It takes more strength than most of us have, which is why we need God's help. The way to break that downward spiral is to see other people the way that God sees them. Or, to put it a different way --

which is actually the same way -- we need to see other people the way God sees us. Sinful, yes. Flawed, for sure. But seen through the lens of Christ's grace, which means that while we were yet sinners, Christ loved us and died for us. Not because we had repented of our sin, not because we deserved Christ's love, but because of Christ's grace. That is the singular grace which I mentioned early on. It can only come from God through Christ because Christ was the only human being to perfectly embody the graces of truth and justice and excellence which come from God.

So for those of us who have received the grace of Christ, how do other people see that in our lives? You may have read Ron Nicodemus' November thoughts in the last Connection newsletter, he mentioned the Amish man (I always heard this story as a Brethren man) who was asked if he was a Christian, replied, "We'll I reckon you'll have to ask my neighbors." Let me put it another way: if you were being recruited by another church and they asked Creekside for a letter of recommendation, what would people here say about you: I hope it would be words of commendation and excellence -- and not just because we want to get rid of you. I should tell you, I actually had opportunity to recommend some of you this week in regard to an inquiry from Don Anderson, who will serve as our moderator today. It is a joy to be able to say good things about you -- and just to be clear, Don is not recruiting anyone to go to another church. What would you say about the brothers and sisters around you if you were writing that letter of recommendation? Words of thanksgiving and encouragement? If we have graces in our life, those two things will match: what people say about the excellence in our own lives, and our appreciation of the excellence of others. In fact, if we have graces in our lives, those two things will naturally increase. Romans 12:10 says, "love one another with mutual affection, outdo one another in showing honor." If you think you're pretty wonderful but everyone around you is inadequate, you are probably not seeing with eyes of grace, and you're probably not very happy. The more graces we acknowledge in other people, the more joy we will have in our own lives.

And finally, one more reason to rejoice in the graces which we have received through Christ: they are free. They do not belong to one person or one ministry team, these graces will not show up on a

proposed budget or in a treasurer's report. The only limits to the graces we receive and the graces we grant to others are the limits we put on them ourselves. I hope all of you will be able to stay for the congregational meeting in the gathering area following this service. Each person's input matters in our life together. I think rejoicing is the right tone for that meeting: for the giving you have done in the past, for the ways you continue to work on behalf of this church and for the kingdom of Christ, and for ministry which God is calling us to in the future; I hope we can rejoice with thanksgiving for what God has done and is doing. Thank you for you ministry and your service, and God bless you. Amen.