

The Courage to be Gracious
So this is my prayer: that your love will flourish and that you will not only love much but well. 1:9 MSG

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PRAYER - Teach us your words of truth and grace and give us courage to live them. Amen

Stories of injustice...

Dec. 2012 Alissa began to think about God's grace, mercy, and forgiveness after a bedtime conversation between her husband, Robbie, and her daughter, Madeline, who was five years old at the time. While Robbie was tucking Madeline into bed, she asked about Emilie (PHOTO SLIDE), her big sister who died in the Sandyhook Elementary school shooting.. How might they be able to see her sister again she asked her dad. Robbie explained that Emilie was in Heaven, and that they would be able to join her there one day. Then Madeline asked, 'What about the boy who shot Emilie? (PHOTO SLIDE) What about him?' Robbie said to his daughter, 'How do you think God feels about him?' She replied, "I think God loves him, but he's really disappointed in what he did.." Madeline's response changed Alissa's perspective. In a later interview, Alissa said this about her daughter's comment, "It made me pause and look at him in a way that up to that point I had resisted seeing. To see him through eyes of grace only found in God - that saw compassion, and love, and empathy."



I have always been proud of being from Wyoming, where we are called the “equality state” and people live by a spirit of rugged independence. I was NOT proud however of what happened in the fall of 1998. Matthew Shepherd (PHOTO SLIDE) was a college student at the University of Wyoming in Laramie. On Oct. 12, 1998 Two fellow students forced Matthew in their vehicle, drove to an isolated area outside the city limits, beat Mathew until he was unconscious, tied him to a buckrail fence and left him for dead. Why? because Matthew happened to be gay. A biker found him some 12-15 hours later, still holding on to life. He unfortunately never regained consciousness and died five days later. The two young men responsible for his death were sentenced to the death penalty under Wyoming law. Matthew’s parents wrestled with the sentence, knowing the death of two more young men would not solve anything. They asked the court to reduce the sentence to life in prison. I don’t know that they ever forgave those young men, but they chose to show mercy and grace when they could have allowed anger and vengeance to rule.



Ten days after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, a man walked into a Dallas convenience store and held a double-barreled shotgun just inches from Rais (Rice Bwee-an) Bhuiyan's face. (PHOTO SLIDE) Bhuiyan, who had been held up before, opened the register, put all the bills on the counter and asked the man not to shoot him. "Where are you from?" the man asked, then opened fire. After he recovered, Rais (Rice) spent years fighting to save the life of Mark Stroman, the white supremacist who killed two other men before shooting Rais — crimes he considered revenge for the 9/11 attacks. Stroman was eventually sentenced to death. Rais (Ra-ese) was quoted saying, "By executing him, we would be losing a life without dealing with the root cause. Execution was not the solution. It would not eradicate hate crimes from this world. I had to save his life to make a change."



In these examples, a choice was made: a choice between anger, hatred and more violence or mercy, forgiveness, and graciousness. You, the people of God have a choice to make. It's the same choice that the followers of Jesus have had to make from the earliest of church gatherings til now. It is the same choice people of faith have had to make in the face of hardship, struggle, and the messiness of living in our world.

In the wake of the attack on the Capitol building and in light of the unrest, division, and turmoil that continues to wreak havoc on our nation, you, we, the church have a choice to make.

You can choose to allow all of it to eat away at your emotional core; pretending you are o.k. and pressing on, all the while it devours you from the inside out turning you into a vessel of bitterness, pain, and apathy. You can choose to let it fester within you, feeding it the energy fueled by propaganda and media hype until it spews out of you like poison or accelerant on a fire. You can choose the path of least resistance, buy your time, lay low, and hope not too much of the filth and mess touches your life or stains your mental and emotional clothing. You can choose to retaliate, throw judgement and hatred around, and seek vengeance in the name of justice.

OR you can choose to be gracious.

On the one hand it should be the easiest choice in the world. On the other hand, we know in reality, it is often far more complicated. It takes courage.

We continue talking about Paul's letter to the believers in Philippi. Remember they are having a significant argument within the church; within the body of believers, about what we are not quite sure, but whatever it was, it was enough that Paul, who was in prison at the time, received word about it and was responding to them.

In this series we have shared Paul's response and message of courage to the church; telling them to have the courage to be vulnerable with one another, to recognize they are in the struggle together and that vulnerability is strength not weakness. Jesus himself chose to be vulnerable and turned systems on end.

Paul tells them to have the courage to change or be changed, to allow the Holy Spirit to mold and shape them and to have the mind of Christ in all that they do; not the mind of the majority or the mind of those with the most money or loudest voice, but the mind of Christ.

Today we discuss Paul's desire for them to have the courage to be gracious. To recognize that perhaps they are not perfect, they mess up, fall short, and carry blame, yet God offers them grace and because of that they too can offer grace to one another for a higher purpose and higher call. It is not their power or ability that allows them to be gracious, but that of God and Jesus.

Read Text: Phil. 1:2-14

Be vulnerable. Be changed. Be gracious. That is the church we are to be? Yes. Why? Because that is the church that will work in unity to serve God and others. That is the church that will reach people in authentic and life changing

ways and meet them where they are. That is the church that will model the way of Jesus; a way of compassion, empathy, and love. If a church cannot offer grace to those within the church, how can they offer it to those outside the church? If we cannot seek unity in who we are and how we respond to the needs around us then why would anyone outside our walls want to follow the Jesus we proclaim?

Paul was writing to perhaps his favorite church. To a people he had come to love; a people who loved and encouraged him and made him proud. To a community of believers who were about doing ministry. They were an active church. They were known in their community for their actions and outreach. . He was writing to what Methodist Dist. Superintendents and Conf. staff today call, “an active and vibrant church.” You might say they were a church that left the building. I know a church like that...

So what was the problem? The problem was they allowed disagreements, opinions, ideas, and issues to come between them that could potentially fracture what they were about and who they were to be.

Paul calls them back to center. From his own prison cell he tells them it is the grace of God that brought him and them this far, the grace that forgives and empowers believers to carry on in unity. It is the grace of God that meets us in our own darkness, trials, and grief and brings us together into the light of Christ - the light of mercy, forgiveness, and unity. It is that grace that allows us to then have the courage to be gracious to others. We can't do it of our own accord - maybe you can, I can't.

I admit, I don't always want to be gracious. I grow weary of watching our world self destruct and denominations self-implode. I am tired of people hurting other people without seeking to listen or even try to understand the issues; tired of people thinking that canceling out each other's ideas, beliefs, experiences, insights, and thoughts is how to live in community. I too get tired of trying so hard. I told the staff the other day I felt like the flag outside the church, flying at half staff. I mourn what has happened in this country - in the past and in the last couple weeks. I mourn all the pain and loss I have seen over the years and sat through with people I come to love, all of which seems magnified right now. My heart hurts...

I can see how it would have been easy for Paul to become bitter. To withdraw into his cell, come to hate those who imprisoned him, and perhaps even come to resent the day God's grace changed his life. It would have been easy for him to come to the conclusion that he deserved his punishment. Afterall, before his own change of heart, he punished and persecuted Christians, even ordered them to death. It would have been easy for Paul to quit, to give up.

But it's not about Paul and it's not about me, is it? It's about Jesus and this incredible mystery of divine and holy love-filled grace that we can never fully understand or grasp. A grace that is incomprehensible; a love that is unconditional, and a hope that is everlasting.

What will our choice be? Will we give up? Will we turn away? Will we allow emotionally charged issues, political differences, hot topics, systemic injustice, fear of the other, or racial tension to divide us? Like the church in Phillippi, we must remember who we are in Christ. We must remember it is by grace, God's grace, we are here to begin with. It is by God's grace that we are

loved and can give love. It is how and why we do what we do. It is God's grace that can do far more than we can. We must remember it is because of that grace, and not anything we do in and of ourselves, that we can have the courage to be gracious; to live a gracious life; to love and love well inside and outside the walls of this building.

In Jesus name, may it be so.

Amen.

May God's grace abound in you and give you hope.

May the peace of Christ reside in you and give you certainty.

May the Holy Spirit fill you with the courage to be gracious through it all.

*Introduction stories were found online.