

“This Is a Day of New Beginnings, Time to Remember and Move On”

Sermon for First Christian Church of Decatur, Georgia

Season of Lent, Sunday, February 24, 2013

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Holy Scriptures: Philippians 1: 3-11; 3: 17 – 4: 1

Chapter 1: 3-11

³ I thank my God every time I remember you, ⁴ constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, ⁵ because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. ⁶ I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. ⁷ It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. ⁸ For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus.

⁹ And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight ¹⁰ to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, ¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

Chapter 3: 17 – 4: 1

17 Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. ¹⁸ For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. ¹⁹ Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. ²⁰ But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ. ²¹ He will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of his glory, by the power that also enables him to make all things subject to himself.

4 ¹ Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.

*“This is a day of new beginnings,
Time to remember and move on,
Time to believe what love is bringing,
Laying to rest the pain that’s gone.”*

Lyrics written by Brien Wren;

music created by Carlton Young;

grace bestowed by Jesus Christ.

Fred Craddock has said that “grace is love in action.”

Gerald May envisions grace as “the active expression of God’s love.”

May we be grateful

for the generosity of God’s grace, an active expression of love.

May we remember with thanksgiving

those who guided us along the highways and byways,
alleyways and pathways

we have traveled so far by grace, with the help
of God.

May we move on into a new day,

into new beginnings,

into new opportunities to model Christ-like
love,

filled with joy and sincerity,

serving gladly in the name of the
Lord.

There is a farmer who is known for his generous giving.

People noticed that the more he gave the more he prospered.

One day someone mentioned this to him, and asked how it
was possible.

The farmer thought for a while and then said, *“I keep
shoveling into God’s bin,*

*and God keeps shoveling into mine, and God must have the
bigger shovel.”*

Did you ever notice how much we tend to gravitate toward
gracious, generous folks?

They’re like a spiritual magnet; we tend to want to imitate
them.

Paul said, *“Join in imitating me.”*

We find this message and mission throughout the Holy Scriptures.

The Apostle Paul, while in prison in Rome, wrote to the church in Philippi.

His letter is one of joy.

Joy is the overarching, pervasive, & consistent message, tone and tenor of Philippians.

Remarkable, considering that these words were set down in a prison cell

while under threat of the death penalty.

With joy he remembers his God, his people, and his faith.

It is with this same sense of joy

that he encourages his listeners to remember and to move on.

Remember who and whose you are.

Move forward as a living example of God's grace in your own context.

Paul writes: *“Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me,*

and observe those who live according to the example

you have in us.” (Philippians 3:

17)

You can find this approach in other missives,

including Paul's letter to God's people in Corinth:

“But by the grace of God I am what I am,

*and his grace toward me has not been
in vain.*

*On the contrary, I worked harder than any of
them*

*—though it was not I, but the grace of
God that is with me.*

Whether then it was I or they,

so we proclaim

*and so you have come to
believe.” (1 Cor. 15: 10-11)*

When I was growing up and playing baseball in the city,

kids would stride up to the plate and, with our bat,
knock the dirt from his cleats. Nothing funny about this...

except that we all wore Converse sneakers and played
on asphalt. We were simply imitating Mickey Mantle or
Willie Mays standing at home plate. We emulated the
greatest ball players, and dreamed of being just like
them. Some of us wished we could bat like Roberto Clemente

or pitch like Sandy Koufax or field the hot
corner like Brooks Robinson. You don't have to have played
baseball *or even like sports*

to know exactly what we're talking about.

Did you ever want to emulate someone?

Or attempt to follow in their footsteps or behavior?

Sharon Daloz Parks writes in Big Questions, Worthy Dreams

about young adults and the stages of faith.

Parks says that college students emulate “people who exemplify certain qualities

[they] would like to have.” Parks writes,

“When interviewing college seniors...I found that if I posed the question,

‘Is there someone whom you wish to be like?’ the students resisted it.

They typically rephrased the question in their response:

‘No, there is no one who is a model for me, whom I want to be *exactly* like,

but there are people who exemplify certain qualities that I would like to have.’

Then they were able to name one or several people

who served as an image of aspects of their emerging self.”

A young woman from Nigeria enrolled at the University of Georgia in Athens.

One week into her first semester, she read a poster about a gathering of UGA students

who were in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ).

She called the number on the poster and inquired whether it was an open meeting.

“May I attend?” she asked, “and can someone give me a ride?”

Dr. Bob Harris, the local clergy advisor to Disciples on Campus,

arranged to pick her up and take her to the gathering.

While en route Harris asked her what she planned to study at college.

“Criminal justice; I want to be a lawyer.”

Then she added, “But if I could be like anybody it would be my youth minister.”

Later Dr. Harris shared with friends that while the student allowed that

her youth minister in Nigeria probably did not know the extent of her influence,

Harris enjoyed knowing that a parish minister inspired another soul

to want to have her qualities.

Who encouraged you?

Who reminded you that you are a child of God,

that you are loved and loveable,

that you belong, regardless of what you believe?

Now, who in your sphere of influence hungers for an encouraging word?

We who are the beneficiaries of God's grace are invited to pass it on.

Who do you know who needs to hear a good word?

We remember that we are the recipients of grace,

grace extended to us unconditionally

by family and friends and strangers;

we are invited to extend grace to someone else;

in fact, to many, many, many "someone elses".

We who believe and doubt, wonder and question, confess,
repent and repeat

are invited to practice what we speak,

and to believe in what we practice.

Practice and proclaim what you have experienced of the
grace of God;

it will not be in vain because your own spiritual
formation will deepen,

and because neighbors may come to receive
and practice grace

in their own way and time,

becoming imitators of the Gospel,
and God will be praised.

Recently here in the South, two friends met for breakfast at
the coffee shop.

One was from north of the Mason-Dixon Line,

and when his ham and eggs arrived

he looked twice at his plate

and then asked the waitress, "*What is
that?*"

She said, “*Grits.*”

He said, “*But I didn’t order grits!*”

She said, “*Darling, you don’t order grits. Grits just comes.*”

There is more than a small bit of good theology here.

We can’t order grace; thanks be to God, *grace just comes.*

Grace is a blessed gift of God.

God’s nature and nurture are synonymous with graciousness.

God’s greatest work of art is making us in God’s own image,

to be gracious, as well.

Does this remind you of Martin Luther’s spiritual revelation

that sparked and spurred the Reformation movement?

We are saved by grace, and by grace alone – ***Sola Gratia.***

The word grace in the New Testament Greek reads *Chasis*.

Chasis was a Christianized modification of the Hellenized greeting of *chairein*.

In other words, early Christians said "Grace and peace"

when they met folks, friends and strangers alike.

You may read in Paul's letters to churches his own words of greeting or benediction,

saying to the people of God, "Grace and peace."

For example, Paul began his letter to the church in Ephesus (1:1b-2) by saying,

"To the saints who are in Ephesus and are faithful in Christ Jesus:

*[Charein] Grace to you and peace from God our
[Creator]*

and the Lord Jesus Christ."

For Paul, even though he used it often, this was never a routine greeting!

You see, when Paul was a Jew named Saul

he vigorously persecuted disciples of Jesus Christ.

He attacked and even murdered people who said "grace" to all they met

without distinction or prejudice.

Paul never forgot that experience.

Paul's memories of his past sins

coupled with his gratitude for the power of God's forgiveness

made his own blessings of grace and peace a miracle every time he said it,

...or any time any one of us extends
grace.

True grace will do this to a person.

True grace transforms us into the kind of people who
remember and give thanks.

To say to another person, "Grace and peace"

is to desire God's unlimited, unmerited, generous
grace and favor

upon other people.

To say grace and peace to one another is to testify to the
character of God-with-us.

To say to another person, "Grace and peace," without
distinction or prejudice

is to desire God's unlimited, unmerited, generous
grace and favor

upon a neighbor.

Giving thanks and saying grace

are intertwined in the language of our culture and
church.

Another word for communion is Eucharist, which means
thanks giving.

How do you say *thank you* in Spanish?

Rowan Atkinson plays the mime character Mr. Bean.

In a film about Mr. Bean's trip to France,

a Parisian asked him whether he wanted cream in his coffee.

Mr. Bean said, "*Oui!*"

"*And would you like sugar?*"

He said, "*No.*"

"*You speak wonderful French.*" she said, to which Mr. Bean answered, "*Gracias!*"

The more grateful we become and behave, the nearer we draw to embodying grace.

Recent reports in the newspaper and in broadcast media

have made us very aware

that political parties, major corporations and networks of organizations

are seeking to re-define themselves.

A whole lotta of folks with power and privilege are suddenly finding themselves

to be increasingly obsolete and on the outside looking in.

A common theme expressed by their leaders goes like this:

“We must do a better job of showing those not yet in our base

how much they need us.

We need to do a better job of telling people

how much they need what we have to offer.”

Grace, the faithful expression of love,

might approach the challenge of being relevant from another angle.

Rather than investing energy to show someone else

how much she or he needs us,

grace should lead one to ask, with all humility,

“What are your needs?

How might we serve you and yours, with the help of God?”

Imagine that.

Imagine the new beginnings

and the new movements of grace

when political parties, corporations, neighborhood organizations,

and yes, temples, mosques, churches,
and communities of faith from all
walks of life
decide to put the needs
and dreams of neighbors
first and foremost.

You know, I wonder if the Apostle Paul might have
something to say,

maybe something like this:

“And this is my prayer,

*that your love may overflow more and more with
knowledge and full insight*

¹⁰ to help you to determine what is best,

*so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and
blameless,*

¹¹ having produced the harvest of righteousness

*that comes through Jesus Christ for the
glory and praise of God.”*

All power be to the Creator, the Son, and the Holy
Spirit. Amen!

Extra Material:

Call to Confession

The Holy Scriptures speak to us with a frankness that is welcome in these days. Hear the Word from Philippians 3: “Brothers and sisters, join in imitating me, and observe those who live according to the example you have in us. For many live as enemies of the cross of Christ; I have often told you of them, and now I tell you even with tears. Their end is destruction; their god is the belly; and their glory is in their shame; their minds are set on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven, and it is from there that we are expecting a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.” Let us pray to be lifted above the temptation to serve only ourselves; may we seek instead to serve the ways of God. Let us silently confess our sins before God and one another.

Assurance of Forgiveness

The Good News is that through Jesus Christ, God “will transform the body of our humiliation that it may be conformed to the body of God’s glory, by the power that also enables God to make all things subject to the Lord. Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved.” (Phil. 3: 21- 4:1)

Call to Communion

The Psalmist prayed, “Lord, do not cast me off, please don’t hide your face, nor take your holy spirit from me!” (Psalm 27: 9) Ah, my friends, how often do we attribute human conditions to God, projecting onto the divine our own fallibilities and fears. Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, “A God who would let us prove his existence would be an idol.” Do you ever imagine that God’s presence is absent when the enemies are at your gate, when difficulties arise, when troubles and trials mount and the way seems dark and cold? And yet, when we stop projecting our self onto the holy, when we cease from worshipping a God made in our image, and simply trust, letting the holy illuminate the way before us and in us, we discover anew the face of God. God responds to the Psalmist, saying, “Seek my face.” (v. 8) God shows us the holy in the here and now. Trust that God will show us what we need to know, and follow.

Fred Craddock once said, "*[Above all, I urge you to be grateful.]*

Of all the virtues, if I could have selected just one for my children,

I would have asked God to make them grateful.

People who are genuinely grateful are never greedy or jealous,

never bitter or small; not self-centered or hateful.

If they are able to see every day as a gift from God

*and see what they have not as their own,
but as what God has given them for a
while,
they are what we call gracious
people.*

To be gracious, you must first be grateful.

I hope that you are grateful."