

Stewards of Grace
Sermon 152 | Greystone Baptist Church | September 11, 2022
Heritage Sunday #38
Philippians 1:3-11

I thank my God each time I remember you...

These words ring forth from pulpits across time and space as people gather for occasions such as this. Heritage Sunday, anniversary Sunday, homecoming, revival, founders' days, and final sermons before retirement; *these* are the words every preacher wants to say on these momentous occasions.

I thank my God, each time I remember you.

It is not just preachers who employ these words in life's most celebrated moments, these are also easily found on greeting cards in the hallmark section as folks look for language to describe deep friendship, appreciation, and encouragement after periods of separation, isolation, and distance.

I thank my God, each time I remember you.

These words resonate deeply with our hearts as we *remember* today. We remember our origin stories, beginning with Pentecost Sunday 1983 when Dr. Lewis issued the call from the pulpit of First Baptist Church Raleigh. 17 faithful folks said, "yes," responding to the need for a church in the new suburban area of Northwest Raleigh. Those 17 of course were the ones whose names are printed on the inside of our bulletins this morning. 17 founding members, some of whom are here with us today. With them, we also remember our charter members, those who joined early on and invested in the dream of the new church that would be built here on the corner of Lead Mine and Sawmill Roads.

It is good and holy work to remember these early stewards of the dream that would become Greystone. Though none would want the personal attention, I'm sure - it is good for us to remember the Spirit of their courage as they embarked on something totally new, for the sake of the Gospel call.

God was beginning good work among them.

One of my favorite stories from this group of founding members I learned in the final days of Eileen Trawick's life. As I was talking with one of her sons, stories emerged from the early days, when the church was still meeting at either the real estate office or Ravenscroft School. Apparently, there was a meeting at which many had gathered to begin planning for the purchase of land and construction of the original Sanctuary (which, of course, is now the Fellowship Hall). The moment of truth came when the conversation turned to the subject of money. Everyone was asked to commit so that the mission of the church could continue to grow. Eileen and Bill Trawick were both at that meeting. Bill, the breadwinner for the family, and Eileen, mother of five active boys who'd given her whole life to raising

them right - which I've heard from many of you who knew these 5, that this was no small task. Of course, both Bill and Eileen were committed to the church. They'd proven that over and over again with gifts of time, service, and financial support. But after this meeting, when the finances had been discussed and the magnitude of the need was shared, there was a change in Eileen.

Almost as soon as the meeting ended, I'm told, Eileen went out looking for a job. When her husband asked what this sudden change was about, she answered something like this: *I signed my name on the line, I'm committed to building that church, so I figured I'd better go out and get a job so I can do my part.*

Eileen's story is a great story but it isn't totally unique in Greystone's history. No, ours is a communal history that can truly be characterized by our favorite phrase of the mission statement which simply says: *Every member is a minister...* This is a place where all are not only welcomed and loved and invited to worship, but this is a place where everyone contributes in order to watch the mission grow. Just like Paul says to (and of) the Philippians, here at Greystone - *all have **shared** in the gospel from the first day until now (v.5)... and all **share** in God's grace...(v.7)*

Sometimes sharing in grace is easy. Like showing up on Sunday morning, sitting in our favorite pews, singing the songs that bring us comfort, and enjoying the fellowship of this family of faith.

But sometimes sharing in grace is not so easy. Paul was clear about that in his letter to the Philippians as he praised them and thanked God for their willingness to *share* in God's grace with him. Whether he was imprisoned or traveling freely throughout the region, the church *shared* in grace with him. This shared grace, as Paul called it, is the same kind of grace that Dietrich Bonhoeffer called, *costly grace*.

This grace, which is a gift from God, is so much more than a simple confession or a theological statement. It is a gift from God so great that if we really receive it, it changes everything. Bonhoeffer calls it "costly grace" because it literally costs us everything. That is what it means to follow Jesus, to be a disciple, to share in the grace of the Gospel. It means we have to give everything away.

Those who are familiar with Bonhoeffer's story know that this experience of grace cost him his life. Having received an invitation to teach at Union Theological Seminary in New York City to avoid the horrors of Nazi Germany in the 1930s, Bonhoeffer chose to return home, to suffer alongside the Jews and other marginalized people. It was Bonhoeffer's understanding of costly grace, sharing in grace, that compelled him to give everything away, following Jesus all the way to the cross.

Eileen's story wasn't the same - no story is - but in her own way Eileen gave up everything in order to share in the grace of God, for the sake of the Gospel. Our founding and charter members understood the mission: to build a church in and for this neighborhood in Northwest Raleigh. They believed that the people who called this place home needed a

place to encounter God, to grow in faith, and to allow their lives to be transformed by the love that they would encounter here. They were recipients of God's grace and they lived to share it with others. This is what it means to be stewards of grace, partners with God in the work of grace unfolding in this world, people who proclaim the good news of God's love not just in word, but also in deed. This is our heritage and this is our calling as we look toward our future together, with God.

What will we do with these tremendous gifts?

Preaching professor, Fred Craddock reminds us that the Greek word for grace is very similar to the word for gratitude. In fact, the two are so similar that Paul sometimes uses them interchangeably. Interestingly, when "the action is from God to us, the translators render it *grace*;" but when the action is from us to God, it is translated, *gratitude*.¹

Perhaps this is because when a gift like grace is given, a gift so big and so full of mercy that it redeems the whole world and frees us all from the things that enslave (things like selfishness and greed, prejudice and violence, self-doubt and insecurity, loneliness and ego...) When God acts in grace, we are transformed by Love, and the only thing we can do with that... is to give thanks by spending the rest of our lives - **sharing in grace**, not the cheap kind that exists only in our words, our private confessions, and religious ceremonies... but the kind that costs us everything because it plays out in public.

Friends, look around.

Let your eyes take in the beauty of this church.

The landscape, the stones, the wood, the windows.

Then look to your neighbor on the pew. To the right and to the left. Look across the room and around behind you.

These are the gifts of grace, given to us and entrusted to us by God.

These are the gifts of God in which others have shared.

These are the gifts of grace which are now ours to steward.

There is still a great need for a church on this corner. For all the people who call this neighborhood home. For all who live in this growing city. For all who are seeking a place where they might be welcomed, loved, and invited... a place where they can encounter God, grow in faith, and be transformed by the Love that they experience here.

And so the call remains today as it was first issued in 1983. God's grace is flowing forth in this world, in this city, in this neighborhood and in this very spot.

Can you perceive it?

Will you receive it?

¹ Fred Craddock, 16

Will you share in it?

Amen.