



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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**Celebrating Grace**  
Dr. Bruce Lancaster

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### *Romans 1:1-7, 18-23*

After last week's Easter service, someone sent me a revised version of that wonderful hymn, "The Church's One Foundation": same tune but lyrics for Easter 2020.

*This is one of the rewritten verses: No gathered choirs are singing; no banners lead the way. O God of love and promise, where's joy this Easter Day? With sanctuaries empty, may homes become the place we ponder resurrection and celebrate your grace.*

Sheldon Sorge points out that the disciples in that first Easter week were socially isolated, locked down at home; sound familiar?

Wouldn't you think they were pondering resurrection, and when Jesus would appear to them wherever they were, I would say they were celebrating grace.

But the week before Easter I read a story of just the opposite.

I'm sure most of you have used or at least heard of Zoom, the online meeting place for families and friends, for those working from home, for worshiping communities and Bible studies.

This article talked about a phenomenon called Zoombombing. What happens is that in the midst of a Zoom meeting, somebody hacks into the meeting and disrupts it with graphic, hateful, or threatening images and language.

One church group said that during their Zoom meeting, they suddenly heard a young male voice start shouting “God is dead, God is dead,” Then other voices joined in, laughing and chanting racist names and taunts.

These are the kind of people Paul is writing about in his letter to the Romans.

What Paul is telling us is that there are some people who know how to ‘celebrate grace’, that’s the beginning of the letter, but there are also some, as he writes a few verses later, who live spiritually violent lives, who cannot say grace, in any form or fashion, nowhere, no how!

Now I believe that Paul is telling us a little bit about himself; that at one time he was one of those people who could not say grace.

The ‘they’ in this text, I think, is Saul before Paul. He was one of those who knew God but was not honoring God, not giving thanks to God.

Dr. Karl Menninger, the noted psychiatrist, discussed this negative personality in his book The Vital Balance. He describes them in vivid terms: “...rigid, chronically unhappy individuals, bitter, insecure...”

What Menninger is saying is that Paul knew what he was talking about, just look in the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles.

Paul, called Saul then, look at his fear, anger, and violence, a bystander acting as a coat rack when Stephen, one of the first Deacons, was murdered, and then taking up the cause himself as he searched high and low for people who claimed

the risen Jesus as the Son of god and was on the road to Damascus to find more Christians to arrest and execute.

These people still exist who do not, who cannot be grateful to God, spiritually violent, unable to celebrate grace.

Then, if you will, Paul was knocked off his high horse of fear and anger and violence and began to walk along the roads of Rome carried by grace!

I have my own picture of grace: Many, many years ago, when I was 19, 20 years old I spent about a year hitchhiking around the South.

I was at home for a few days before heading to New Orleans, where I would live for several months. I was packing my backpack, getting ready to leave.

My father walked in and handed me the keys to a Volkswagen van, and said, "I don't want you to hitchhike anymore."

That van was grace. I drove to New Orleans and a lot of other places the next few years in what a proper theologian, the 19<sup>th</sup> century Princeton professor Benjamin Warfield, called the "free sovereign favor to the ill-deserving."

I was truly ill-deserving, but I rode in grace. You can call it a free ride, but that's grace.

Like Anne Lamott says, "I do not at all understand the mystery of grace, only that it meets us where we are but does not leave us where it found us."

I don't know of anything that has the power to change us from within like the freedom that comes from the grace of God: undeserved, unearned, the power of the gospel to transform the way we travel the journey of life.

That is the stark choice we face in our world today: Will we honor God and glorify God or deny and dishonor God...will we bless life as it arises or will we condemn it... say grace or say grumble.

I think Mattie Stepanek makes the division between those who say grumbles and those who can say grace in one of his short poems, aptly called, "Grasp of Truth":

*If you have Enough breath  
To complain About anything,  
You have more than Enough reason  
To give thanks About something.*

This from a young boy who was on a ventilator from his birth until his death at age 13.

Or as the great theologian Karl Barth said, "To believe in Jesus Christ means to become thankful."

True gratitude does not mean being at the top of the heap and saying to God, "Thanks." And neither is it looking at someone at the bottom of the heap and proclaiming, "There but for the grace of God, go I."

I suggest to you that the simple act of saying grace around our own tables can guide us in our lives as Christians, a simple affirmation of faith for a way of living out God's grace we have received in Jesus: *God is great, God is good, Let us thank God for our food. By God's hands we are fed, Thank you, God, for daily bread.*

In this way, acknowledging God's greatness and goodness for all that we need for the day is the beginning of our gratitude, a daily practice that helps shape our whole lives as a celebration of grace.

It means when I claim mercy, I must show mercy. When I ask for forgiveness, I must forgive.

When I affirm faith in God's grace, I must live graciously in relation to others. And that's not always easy to do.

True gratitude for God's generosity calls all of us to action, and when we live with this attitude to celebrate grace, the desire to do good is an act of dependence on God, a way of aligning our daily lives with God's purposes in Jesus Christ.

Every spiritually violent situation, every victim, every need Jesus met, however small, was blessed by the living word of God's grace.

In other words, the celebration of grace is God's active goodness in and through any situation, a life that honors God, glorifies God as we do whatever we can to pray and work, to serve and sacrifice, to care for God's people and God's creation.

When celebrating grace rules our hearts, the desire to love God, to love neighbor becomes our beatitude to face the days ahead:

- with courage and confidence in the future,
- with thankfulness for all the good things we have known and experienced,
- and with joy even amid the tears of where we are and how we are.



We ponder resurrection and celebrate God's grace!

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.

God's Grace is beyond our wildest imaginings and embraces us as we are and where we are to say grace, be grace, do grace this day and always. Amen.



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2040 Washington Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15241  
412-835-6630  
[www.westminster-church.org](http://www.westminster-church.org)