

January 1, 2017
John 1:14-18

God's Never Ending Gift Giving

Over the past couple of weeks I have heard a lot of people express excitement about saying goodbye to 2016. While some were able to say why, others just seemed to feel that way. Like the world had beaten them down and they were ready to start a new.

This desire for a new start is something I suspect we all know. I freely confess this desire has happened more than once in my own life. There have been times when I was able to recognize this need for a reboot and there have been times when loved ones saw it before I did. As hard as it is to admit, aren't there times when our loved ones are better clued in to our lives than we are. Better yet, don't we need those influences in our lives sometimes. What might our life look like if we embraced this need instead of pushing it away.

If only we could recognize that this need is not unique to us. If only we could find eyes to see and ears to hear, history could be our greatest teacher. And make no mistake, it will take a new set of eyes and ears because as best I can tell, more often than not history has served only to foretell the future. You see this need for a reboot has been handed down from generation to generation to generation. And I believe once we can recognize this need in our own lives we come ever closer to accepting God's never-ending gift of Grace.

When the law became a tool of oppression, God was there. When Kings, Rulers and Emperors Lorded their perceived power over others, God was there. And all along the way, God always reminded his people of his Love, and protection and promise of liberation. No matter what they did, or said or lacked or possessed, God's love remained. God's promises remained. God remained.

While our Old Testament stories are filled with God's use of Prophets and Angels as Messengers, our New Testament stories give us Jesus, and in and through Jesus, God chose to live among us. Why? Why would God choose this?

During those times **g**ods remained in their lofty otherworld looking for ways to punish the lowly wrongdoers, while occasionally offering them a blessing. Sacrifices were made to various gods in hopes that they would find favor with certain people. Those gods would never stoop so low as to live among the people.

I wonder sometimes if we still believe in this type of god. Nothing about that understanding of the nature of gods would lead any of us to a better understanding of Grace. And if we still have such a view of God, then we can't expect to understand the most radically selfless gift we have ever, and will ever receive, the gift of GRACE.

In his book *What's so Amazing About Grace*, Philip Yancey writes, "from nursery school onward we are taught how to succeed in the world of ungrace. Work hard for what you earn. The early bird gets the worm. No pain, no gain. There is no such thing as a free lunch. Demand your rights. Get what you pay for. I know these rules well because I live by them. I work for what I earn; I like to win; I insist on my rights. I want fairness, I want people to get what they deserve – nothing more, nothing less." If any of you are like me, the world Yancey describes sounds very familiar. You see this is the world of un-grace which we seem to know all too well. This is the world of un-grace which seems to lure us in before we even know what has hit us. We so easily fall victim to seeing this world as a world of un-grace.

What if our way of seeing needed a slight adjustment? What if we needed to adjust the way we receive gifts? What if the only way to accept Grace was to open yourself fully (whole heart, whole mind and whole body)? I know we all know how to receive gifts in that way and I suspect we did just that last week as we unwrapped gifts given to us by our loved ones. Are the gifts from our loved ones easier to fully accept because we feel like we already know what we are supposed to do with them. We seem to know what those gifts are asking of us. Grace is altogether different though, isn't it?

What if we allowed Grace to work on us, instead of thinking we had to work on Grace? If Grace worked on us and we opened ourselves up to its benefits, could we better accept ourselves? Could we better accept others? How radical might such an approach be for you, for me, for FBCJ? In my estimation, these are the very questions we should be asking and we need to be open to the possibilities of where the answers will take us.

For Philip Yancey, questions like these led him to write the award winning book *What's So Amazing about Grace*. When asked about his motivation, he said "I wrote this book because Grace is not the first word that comes to mind when people think of Christians." It was impossible for Yancey to reconcile the words of John's gospel ("In his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace") with

knowing that Grace was not how people thought of Christians, and he was bothered by that. We should be too.

He was able to find such a grace-filled community and they happened to meet on Tuesday nights in his downtown Chicago Church. The people of this community were alcoholics coming to an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting and before Yancey himself attended a Tuesday night meeting he was confused about one thing: why did they come to church on Tuesday nights instead of Sunday mornings.

One Tuesday night Yancey went to that AA meeting and came away with a new set of eyes and ears, and a new understanding of the transformative power of Grace. He said, “It became clear to me why people were drawn to those Tuesday night meetings and not the Sunday morning ones because it was at those Tuesday night meeting that everyone found **GRACE ON TAP.**”

I want you to know, I have seen the Grace on Tap of which Yancey speaks, and I pray I never forget it. Years ago, Amy & I had the privilege of attending an Open AA meeting in support of a loved one receiving a significant “chip” commemorating a specific number of years of sobriety. Attending this meeting opened our eyes to a world previously unknown. In this new world, people were free. Free to bare their wounds. Free to acknowledge their mistakes. Free to admit their powerlessness, and most transformative for me, they were free to love themselves and be loved by others. **NO MATTER WHAT!**

Friends, this is who the church is called to be. I want to see a church where people are accepted when in need - not having to pretend they have it all together. Even in my relatively young state, I know people are looking for a measure of love, acceptance and forgiveness. People are looking for Grace. Church needs to reclaim its place where broken people come to experience healing for their soul, a place where their life can be put back together again. Church should be a place where people experience God’s Grace on Tap!

This is at the heart of Jesus’ life, Jesus’ message. Jesus is a game changer, and yet for Christians it is so easy to take it all for granted. The reality that God has come to us, not in words on a page, or even words spoken by others, but in human form — that is utterly and completely amazing. God can no longer be relegated to some distant kingdom of clouds, listening to angels jamming on harps morning, noon, and night. Neither can human beings, regardless of religion or background, be treated as if they do not matter. No, Jesus transforms our understanding of ourselves, of what it means to be human.

Jesus' presence in the world forces us to come face to face with a present and active God in our midst. A God whose very being is love and desires for us to become the same. Jesus compels us to recognize in every person the gift of God's revelation that each of us make God known and present in ourselves.

The life, death, and witness of Jesus call us to rearrange our priorities and values. In our own lives sometimes we have to be willing to move aside, to make room for someone else to shine. It is important to remember that it is not all about me. We share the stage with all those around us and we must continuously ask ourselves if we are you making room for them to shine too?

God's Grace asks this of us and John, a very old man when he wrote these words, reminds us of as much. [Read vs.14] Full of grace...full of forgiveness...full of truth...and ultimately full of hope...hope for the hungry, the thirsty, the imprisoned and the lonely.

That is who Jesus is and this is what Jesus revealed to us about who God is...the One who finds us...and saves us...and helps us to see the world...like he sees the world.

It is my hope that as we leave here today, we do so asking ourselves if we are making space for God to shine through us. Are we doing what is necessary to make space for others? How about making space for God. This is the best way we can accept God's gift of Grace. Open our hands, receive and let it transform us so that we become dispensers of Grace ourselves.

Grace is a gift, free of charge. It's on the house. All that is required is that you open yourself and accept it.

This, my brothers and sisters is the GOOD NEWS of the Gospel.

And Thanks be to God.

Amen.