

Grace Notes



Grace Church Congregational
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Pittsfield, MA 01201

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"In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. *1 John 4:10-11*





From the Pastor's Desk

For I consider that the sufferings of the present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. (Rom. 8:18)

Some of you took advantage of our adult Sunday school class throughout the autumn. We studied the book of Job, led by Doug Rose. I personally felt it was a great study. Thanks Doug.

There are many who feel that the book of Job is a downer. It's the story of the man Job, whom God allowed Satan to inflict with all kinds of suffering- the sudden death of his children, the loss of his wealth, and then to top it off, an attack on his health. The story is laid out like a Shakespearean play- Act I: scene 1 – God and Satan in conversation, scene 2- suffering, scene 3- God and Satan in conversation again,... You get the point. The main body of the play involves the conversations between Job and his "well-meaning" but unsympathetic friends, all of who were unaware of the agreement between God and Satan. We are the audience, watching the drama unfold.

But why is the story in the Bible? Are we merely bemused spectators, or is there an important theological message for us? It is part of Scripture, so you know the answer to that. "All Scripture is...profitable..." (2 Tim. 3:16)

But what about suffering? What are we to make of the dreaded diagnosis of cancer, or the loss of a job and foreclosure of our home? What are we to say to parents who lose a teenage son in a car accident? The deeper questions are, where is God in our suffering? Does God notice? Does he care? Is he really there? Have I done something wrong for which he is punishing me? These are important questions which we have all asked or will ask at some point in our lives. We dare not trivialize them.

Job's three friends thought they had the answers, but they each missed the boat. Their unsympathetic responses were based on some form of "retribution" theology. That is that Job himself was the cause of his distress. For Job, the question was, "in what way? What have I done specifically that God should take out his anger on me?" Have you ever had that question?

I think we as contemporary Americans are really more Epicurean than Christian in our theology. That is, we somehow think that the avoidance of pain and the enjoyment of pleasure in whatever form is the chief end of man. Thus it is natural to think that any form of suffering is a sign of bad luck or divine displeasure, and we conjure up trite fixes that are within our control, when in actuality a great deal of suffering in our lives is beyond both our control and our understanding.

Bill Edgar, in his book, *Truth in All its Glory*, points out that that the Asian church has a theology of suffering that is missing in the contemporary western church. I suppose that the Asian church has earned it through the crucible in a way that we haven't. In that respect their understanding is more reflective of our Puritan forefathers in this country as well as those of the early church. Is it possible that God still really loves us in spite of our suffering? After all, he did send his Son to suffer for us.

I in no way want to promote a spirit of masochism, but there is actually a beneficial side to suffering, in that it moves us beyond a superficial expression of faith. For one thing, it can, deepen rather than undermine our faith by giving us a greater appreciation for the depths of suffering Christ went through on our behalf. Suffering can also enhance our sympathy for others who suffer too. (see 2 Cor. 1:3-5) Lastly, suffering can also enhance the validity of our witness. Justyn Martyr, one of the early church patriarchs wrote, "The blood of martyrs is seed". So it has been through the history of the church. Suffering has often been accompanied by conversions and church growth, because our faith appears less superficial and more genuine.

Of course, suffering is not the end of the story for Job, nor is it for us. Glory is.



Pastor Tom Bridgman

Missions Corner



New Year Greetings from the Schmidts

The ABUNDANT GRACE of our LORD JESUS CHRIST be upon you in 2016!

Throughout 2015 we have seen God's sprinkling of **GRACE** in so many situations! Starting with you who have cheered us on through your prayers and giving of financial support-**thank you!**

We thank the Lord for His blessings upon **our family**. By **God's grace** we were able to serve here in Sapporo. Rebekah and Kevin had a big change moving to Las Vegas. Kevin and his uncle have started a Japanese restaurant there. Rebekah, by God's gracious provision already has a new job. She will be teaching middle school math at a charter school starting in January! Hannah continues to teach English in Japanese middle schools, and has developed into a water color artist. She had two exhibits last year. She also is now a friend/partner with OMF. Andrea loves singing in the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Chorus, encouraging missionaries by leading a missions prayer group at her church and continues teaching high school math.

In the **English Speakers' Fellowship** we have experienced God turning "hard rock into springs of water" (Psalm 114:8) in many people's lives. An American woman's boyfriend believed and just got baptized in December! God's **GRACE** was also shown in spiritual growth in many lives: repentance, joy in stronger faith, an Australian committing to full time ministry...We praise the Lord! We are also thankful the three new babies are healthy and growing fine.

This last year has shown an increase in guests at the Guest Home, so we are very thankful that in August we got an OMF short-term worker to help us once a week! She also does childcare for a family who is attending the OMF Language and Culture School. We hope to leave the Guest Home well organized for the Canadian couple who will take over for us during our Home Assignment, which begins the end of March.

We trust you had a blessed Christmas! A very Happy New Year to you all! We look forward to seeing you in 2016!

Much love in Christ our Lord,

Dieter and Shelley



New Neighbors

Adventures in Finland Part 2

by Ian Bridgman

“Hey! Come eat with us!” they called in a strong Russian accent. I didn’t really want to. My friend Octavio and I were staying one night at a guest house attached to a church in Rovaniemi, Finland, a small city right on the arctic circle. We were on our way north for a wilderness camping trip and needed an early start the next morning.

“Oh yes,” they insisted, “delicacies from Belorussia!” There was no escaping. I shuffled over to the table to find a plate with a white substance in the shape of a small loaf of bread. The two men fixing this little meal were more permanent residents of the guesthouse. One was a big, bear shaped construction worker from northwest Russia; the other was a short, slender, church staff member from Latvia. Together they made quite a comical and hospitable pair. They cut off a slice of the white stuff and gave it to me. It was cold, soft but firm, and a bit salty. I thought to myself that this might be what fat would taste like if you could eat slice-of-bread-like pieces of fat. I stopped chewing, then inwardly recoiled as I realized I was indeed eating a slice of pure fat, just like the fat found on the edge of a slice of Christmas ham. My new Russian friend, between mouthfuls of eggs, rye bread, and fat slices, was extolling its benefits.

“Northern people eat this!” he said as he slapped a couple slices onto a frying pan. “For protection against the cold. Because, much fat! Siberia winters very cold. Minus 45 Celsius!” He put a new, sizzling piece onto my plate. Warmed up, it tasted much better, like bacon, just without the actual bacon. I might be able to get used to this after all.

A loaf of fat was not the only new experience I came across during my six-week adventure in Finland. The first that stood out to me was the language barrier. I am no stranger to language barriers, and have put in much time and energy learning how to overcome them. Between my French, Spanish, and more recently, Portuguese, I can go almost anywhere in the Western Hemisphere and speak with just about anybody. The thing is, though, that those languages are all primarily western languages, and out here on the eastern edge of the western world, they didn’t get me very far. Here was a whole new set of languages and culture—Finnish, Russian, Estonian, Latvian, and on the way home, Turkish. These were languages I had never been exposed to before, and for the first time in a long time, I was dependent on other people being able to speak my language, instead of me being able to speak theirs.

Along with new languages, of course, comes new people. And not just northern European people. The wave of migrants escaping the Middle East isn’t just arriving in Germany and the U.K., it has reached Finland as well. For the first time, Finland is seeing serious changes to its long history of homogeneity. I was surprised to see the new arrivals showing up not just in the capital, but also in small cities all over the country, even way up north, on the edge of the arctic. Talk about a different environment. Some have been there a while already. They run Kebab shops or other restaurants. They’ve learned to speak Finnish. Some are enrolled in the local universities. Others are the newly arrived, still living in processing centers and half-way houses while they get their bearings in their new country. I often saw them in groups, hanging out at the malls with nothing to do, and looking somewhat out of place. I couldn’t help but feel sorry for them, plopped into a radically different place with mountain upon mountain of language and cultural barriers.

(Continued on next page)

(New Neighbors, continued)

I had a chance to meet a few of them. On my last weekend in Finland, my friend and I stumbled across an African party around the corner from our hostel in Helsinki. To our surprise, it was mostly English speaking immigrants from Gambia (a tiny country in West Africa). Go figure. Along with them were people from Somalia and even South Sudan. Later that same weekend, we met a girl as she arrived at the hostel. Place of origin: Afghanistan. It struck me that this was the first time I had ever seen anybody from that country. The only thing I had ever seen were images of terrorists or destitute villagers, men disfigured by battle scars or women buried in burkas. And yet there she was, friendly, well-spoken, . . . and very pretty too. I wish I could have met more of the migrants, learned some of their stories, and maybe a few phrases in their languages. Coming from a country known for being a melting pot, I never expected to have my world opened up by going to Finland.

One thing we should perhaps consider is how difficult it can be to arrive in a new country and try to adapt to a new language, culture, and value system. The thing that frustrated me the most when I lived in Martinique was not just adjusting to a new culture, but having to meet the expectations of people who had no idea of how it felt to do so. The same thing applies to us here in the USA. The vast majority of Americans have never had any viable cross-cultural experience, and wouldn't be able to put themselves in someone else's shoes even if they wanted to. There is nothing wrong with not having travelled the world, and while I personally don't understand the sentiment, there is nothing wrong with not really wanting to. It is possible, though, and unfortunately common, to take a sort of pride in being provincial. That is perverse, and has no place in the body of Christ. The stunning diversity of peoples and cultures on this planet is a reflection of the creativity of our Maker. When we become defensive, dig in our heels, and actively resist understanding those who appear different from us, we are actually thumbing our noses at the work of His hands. Let's not be like that. Most of us will never run out of pages in our passports. Some of us will never have one at all. That doesn't mean we can't prayerfully consider how we might love our neighbor, whoever that might be. Jesus loved people. All sorts of people. He commands us to do the same. Let's be like Jesus.





GRACE CHURCH NEWS



Women's Fellowship

The February Women's Fellowship will gather on **Saturday, February 6th, from 9:30-11:00 a.m.** Join us as we look together at "the power of words", and what we can learn from God's Word. Refreshments will be served.

Men's Prayer Fellowship

Men of all ages are welcome at the Men's Prayer Fellowship. This month the men will meet **Saturday, February 20th, from 7:00-8:30 a.m.**, at the home of Doug Rose in Stockbridge.

Come for a time of looking into the Scriptures, discussion, prayer, and fellowship.



Prayer Gatherings

All are encouraged to take part in our monthly Prayer Gatherings on **Sunday, January 31st**, and again on **Sunday, February 28th**, from 5:00-6:00 p.m. Join us as we come before our Father's throne to praise Him, pray for one another, seek His direction, and "find grace and mercy to help us in our time of need." *Hebrews 4:16*

Winter Cheer

During these snowy days of winter, let's take time to reach out to each other. Send a note, invite for tea or a meal, make a phone call, bake some bread or cookies, write a thank you note, or do whatever suits your style and the need. It's amazing how cheering a simple act can be.

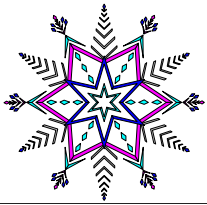
Love one another with brotherly affection. Romans 12:10



LOOKING AHEAD

Spring Women's Retreats

- ◆ The annual Faithlift will be held at Lakeside Christian Camp this year, and will begin **Friday evening, March 11th** and continue on **Saturday, March 12th**. Saturday only options will be available. Judy Reamer will be the speaker. The event is sponsored by the Evangelical Free Church of Pittsfield. More detailed information will be forthcoming.
- ◆ Reserve Friday and Saturday, **April 15-16, 2016** for the annual OPC Women's Retreat at Lakeside Conference Center in Pittsfield. Details will follow.
- ◆ Many women find these retreats edifying and a blessed time of fellowship with fellow sisters in Christ. Consider attending one or both as you are able!



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January 17 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship[18 7:00 Addictions Victorious	19 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	20	21	22	23
24 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	25 7:00 Addictions Victorious	26 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	27	28	29	30
31 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship 5:00 Prayer	February 1 7:00 Addictions Victorious	2 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	3	4	5	6 9:30 a.m. Women's Fellowship
7 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	8 7:00 Addictions Victorious	9 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	10	11	12	13
14 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	15 7:00 Addictions Victorious	16 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class 7:00 Annual Meeting	17	18	19	20 7:00 a.m. Men's Prayer Fellowship
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