



Grace Notes



Grace Church Congregational
1055 Williams Street
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Volume XV, Issue 3

May 2017

Honor Your Mother



Any suggestions or submissions for next month's newsletter may be sent to **secretary.gracecc1@verizon.net**, or put in the tray on the secretary's desk.



From the Pastor's Desk

But as for you, continue in what you have learned, and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which

I walked into the house the other day and witnessed my wife sitting on the couch with of our grandsons snuggled up on each side of her as she was reading to them from the Bible story book. They were so engrossed in the story they were almost completely oblivious to my presence. Not that I minded; I was just delighted to see them that invested in what they were reading, not to mention their affection for Grandma.

The second Sunday of May is designated as “Mother’s Day”. It’s is an opportunity for us to express our appreciation to all the moms in our lives, whether it be our wives, our mothers, our grandmothers, or even all the women who have played an important role in our lives. We honor them by giving them flowers or taking them out to dinner, and yes, making mention of all their contributions in church. But do we really take time to think of the most important contribution of all—the faithful presence of Christ lived out in them in all the small moments of life?

This is exactly what the Apostle Paul does in the 1st and 3rd chapters of 2 Timothy. He writes, *I am reminded of your sincere faith, a faith that dwelt first in your grandmother Lois and you mother Eunice. (1:5)* Later he writes, *continue in what you have learned, and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings. (3:14-15)*

We should not underestimate the importance of what Paul says here. He writes that the investment that Timothy’s mother and grandmother made in his life had a profound impact on who he was later in life. There is an important lesson for us here, isn’t there?

Life gets busy, doesn’t it? There is so much to occupy our time and energy. The older I get the more I am aware of the limitations of both. I watch the moms of young children in our church after worship on Sundays, and am reminded of my own family twenty or thirty years ago. There are a thousand and one balls to juggle, from keeping everyone fed to making sure the kids get their schoolwork done. And for those who work outside the home there is also the responsibility of getting to work on time. Who has time to read Bible stories? Yet, when push comes to shove, it’s the spiritual groundwork that is laid that is going to prove most important in years to come.

How is that groundwork laid? By our attention to all the little things in life. Not just washing dishes and clothes, as important as those things might be, but by the way our relationship with Christ is reflected in the everyday details of life. And that is exemplified as much as anywhere in the role that God’s Word plays in our lives, and how much that Word permeates everything we do.

If that is true in our personal families, then it is equally true for us as a church. The primary responsibility for raising our children lies within the home. But as followers of Jesus we are also part of his church. Each local congregation is a body, coming together for worship, but also to support each other in our Christian walk. When parents bring a child forward for baptism, they make a vow to the congregation as to how they will raise that child. But at the same time, the congregation makes a commitment to the parents to stand beside them and encourage them in the fulfillment of their parental responsibilities. That support should prove to be a lifeline for the parents. This is why things such as Sunday school and informal fellowship are so important. Thus on Mother’s Day do we not also thank our Sunday school teachers?

Parenting is not for the faint of heart. It’s hard work. Ask any of the moms (and dads) present today. We take the time to applaud you. We also encourage you with the words, “Keep up the good work, knowing that your labor is not in vain.



Pastor Tom Bridgman

Operation Christmas Child Shoebox Story

by Izabella

I grew up in communist Romania. We were not allowed to go to church, have Bibles, or even talk about God. All that was forbidden. When I was 7 and my brother was 10, we found a Bible hidden in the floor of our house. We didn't know what it was. We started reading it like they taught us in school—start at the beginning, go to the end. We'd never heard these stories before. Then in fifth grade I was invited to a little underground church by one of my classmates. I asked my Dad if I could go. I begged him and begged him. Finally he said, "If your brother goes with you, you can go." We went after dark, definitely hiding. When I heard what the pastor was reading, I thought, I've heard this story somewhere before. I put together that the book he was reading was the same book we had at home. I got really excited!

When I was 13 it was really, really cold in September. We didn't have electricity most nights so when it got dark it was bedtime for us kids. The only way Mom and Dad would allow us to go out and play was if it snowed. Then it was not as pitch dark and there was something to do outside. I had heard a lot about prayer, but I'd never actually heard somebody pray. Even at the church, the pastor could never actually pray in front of us or share the Gospel. Under communism, he never knew who was a spy. He had to be very careful. I told him, "I want to learn how to pray so I can start praying for snow." That night he sat me down and taught me for the first time how to pray. "Izabella, just talk to God as though He is your best friend. You tell Him what's on your heart, what's on your mind, and He will answer." I thought, I just have to ask Him and He will answer me? Why haven't I been asking for more stuff? I'm definitely going to ask for snow. I remember going to the window the next morning expecting to see snow and there wasn't any. I wondered, What's wrong? What happened?

Come December there was still no snow and I was very, very disappointed. I told the pastor, "Did you know that this prayer thing doesn't work?" He said, "Izabella, God always answers prayers. He promises that in His Word. Sometimes those things don't look the same way we picture it. You are expecting beautiful white snow to fall from the sky but maybe God has something different in mind." Christmas came and went and there was still no snow. I was so disappointed that I lost my zeal of taking the Bible out every day and reading it.

A couple of days later, people started running in the streets. In Romania that meant one thing—that there was something at the grocery store. We thought it might be oranges or bananas because of Christmas. My brother and I put our shoes on and ran as quickly as we could to get in line. As we ran, though, people were passing the store. We wondered, What's going on?

Big trucks pulled in and there were lots of people there who were happy. When they opened the backs of the trucks, there were lots of colorful boxes. A lady came up to me and said, "This is yours." "What do I have to do?" I asked. "Nothing," she said. "It's just yours—totally yours." Then she asked, "Is there anything I can pray with you for?" I thought, OK, this is my moment. "Would you pray with me for snow?" She didn't ask any questions, she just did. Then she gave me a hug.

My shoebox was so colorful. I'd never seen so many colors before! We did not have a lot of colorful things. Even Christmas presents were wrapped in brown paper bags. This was the first thing that stood out to me. Then I took out a snow globe and held it, wondering what it was. A little boy passed me and grabbed my hand and started to shake it really hard. I looked at it and remembered exactly what my pastor said. "God will answer your prayers. Keep your eyes open because it might not look the way you want it, but He will answer." I thought, This is it! It felt like it was snowing all around me. God, I prayed, I thank you for my snow and just apologize for shoving the Book back. I'm going to keep reading it.

We can't put snow globes in shoeboxes anymore because they are liquid and might break, but I will never forget that moment. It was a moment of knowing this God that had been pursuing me through His Word since I was 7. I finally got it. He was a God who was real and He was looking out for me and He does answer prayers.

Editor's note: Since the adult Sunday school class recently finished studying The Lord's Prayer, I thought this article from World Magazine was apropos.

Forgive Those Debtors:

And don't let past interactions freeze your opinions about others

Andrée Seu Peterson

In church I happened to sit down behind a woman who doesn't like me. She used to, but then we disagreed in a Sunday school class and her countenance has changed ever since. It occurred to me during the opening hymn that halfway through the service there was a 50/50 chance we would have to interact at the greeting time. Of course it was possible that she would chat with the person in front of her and we would both be spared the encounter.

These are the subterranean dramas of which Sunday mornings and Garrison Keillor skits about Minnesota Lutherans are made. On one level you have the safe and predictable liturgy going on; on the other level the pews are fraught with dangers and simmering axes and alliances. If angels can read the minds of the faithful in the sanctuary, what do they glean of the state of Christendom? We tend to live with those unsavory subplots as if they were as inevitable as gingivitis in old age. But should we? And what happens to the church when we do settle for any number of half-digested grievances?

One of Jesus' more uncomfortable commands, because it comes with a daunting consequence for non-compliance, is that we forgive one another: "Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors...For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you, but if you do not forgive others their trespasses, neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses" (Matthew 6:12, 14-15).

I interpret the part about "neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses" as meaning "neither will your heavenly Father forgive your trespasses." Call me a literalist. In any case, I don't want to find out what it means at the Judgment if I am found guilty of it.

It is easy to think we have done better with Christ's command to forgive than we actually have. This is because of a deficient understanding of forgiveness. We no longer dwell languidly over fantasies of blowing up our ex-boyfriend's house, so we are content that we have grown. We arrive at the place of releasing resentment toward our parents for not having been perfect, and we think the job of forgiveness is done. We have forgiven ergon, we think—all five people who sinned against us in

our lives.

But what of the matter of keeping short accounts in the scores of our daily frictions in the church body? Somehow, hard feelings generated by these are not seen as having anything to do with the command to forgive. These are seen as, well, life. And we have a right to like whom we like, don't we?

But if human forgiving is supposed to imitate God's own manner of mentally removing transgression as far as east is from west (Psalm 103:12) and of tossing the offense into the sea of forgetfulness, then when we forgive-but-don't-forget, we never give a chance to the other person to change.

Relations become frozen. You see a person who was a jerk to you 10 years ago, and you think as he approaches, "Oh, there's that jerk." But he may not be a jerk anymore. If he has the Holy Spirit in him, assume that he is not. Start in with that assumption. God has been dealing with him in many ways since you last interacted. Give your brother a clean slate every day. You know you want one too. Christianity should be all about believing in and hoping for change—not only for ourselves but for other people. "Love believes all things. Love hopes all things." Freezing our opinions based on past interactions gunks up the works and brings the life of the church to a grinding halt. We file brothers away in the file of "foolish," or "proud," or "liar," and give them no chance to surprise us with their new growth.

That's why God takes forgiveness so seriously that he will not forgive us if we do not forgive others. It is not just about individual petty gripes but the growth of the church at large. You are changing, sister, so am I. The Holy Spirit dwells in both our mortal temples.

Used by permission, October 15, 2016, *World Magazine* website: wng.org



Soccer and Sauna: The Finnish Football Experience

Ian Bridgman



Well. I did it. Just as winter was starting to break at home, I stuffed a new pair of soccer shoes into my bags and boarded a plane to Kajaani, Finland, just over 3 hours south of the Arctic Circle. Most people look confused when I tell them I came to Finland to play soccer, and with good reason. While the country produces plenty of hockey stars and Olympic skiers, top soccer talents are few and far between, and its national team has never qualified for a World Cup. So why would I come to Finland to play soccer, especially to small city buried in snow for half the year? Good question.

Finland might not share the soccer heritage of Germany, Italy, or Spain, but it is still a European nation, which means a well-organized soccer infrastructure, as well as robust fan culture. This means that even a small city like Kajaani (pop. 40,000) can somehow produce a professional team, a semi-pro team, and a competitive amateur team, on top of the spider web of local teams that compete within the city. Contrast this with the United States, where the plentiful soccer talent is hindered by the sheer size of the country, as well as by a scholastic-centered sports system in which the vast majority of athletes drop out of competitive play the day they graduate from college, years before their potential peak. Those outside of major cities are often relegated to a no-man's-land of bitter, beer-bellied has-beens and recreational weekend warriors. I couldn't bear the thought of resigning myself to a similar fate, but I also knew that playing competitive soccer in a country bursting at the seams with 17 year-old superstars was not a realistic option. A country like Finland might just be the perfect spot. The "Goldilocks zone" of the soccer world. So when my best friend Octavio, and his wife, Mari, offered me the upstairs of their house while I took another crack at competitive soccer, how could I say no?

That said, there were no unrealistic expectations. At 31 years old and 6 years removed from high-level soccer, the chances of this experiment ending in disappointment were high. From Octavio's scouting reports, I figured playing with the amateur team was a realistic place to start. But to obtain a visa that would let me stay for an entire 8-month season, I would need a contract from either the semi-pro, or even professional team. Finland may be Finland, but semi-pro is still semi-pro, and my chances of playing at that level were slim to none. I struggled with whether or not this was the right thing to do. Was I being foolish? Childish? Selfish? Irresponsible? Would I be a burden to my friends and deprive my parents of support at a critical time for our family? I did not take the decision to come here lightly. Still, the door to go to Finland stayed open, while every opportunity for decent employment in the U.S. seemed to go up in smoke. After many prayers and with the backing of my family and other trusted believers, the chance to play in Finland appeared to be an opportunity I could not refuse. The challenge was on.

It's been 2 months now since I first landed in the winter-wonderland that is central Finland in early March. In some ways, the experience has been everything I hoped for, but it has not come without severe disappointment. I had trained diligently on my own leading up to my arrival, but I knew I would still need time to adjust to playing with a proper team. I showed up to my first practice with the amateur team only to find out that the program was folding. We were being sent to form a new, reserve squad directly affiliated with the semi-pro team. The change was an exciting development; it meant increased visibility and higher potential of moving up, but it also meant directly competing against players already under contract, as well as against rising talents from the development academy. There was a chance I might not make the team at all. Tryouts were a week later. It was some of the fastest, most furious soccer I have ever played. When the dust settled, one of the coaches approached with the training schedule for the next 4 weeks. I was in, at least for the pre-season.

Continued on next page

Soccer, continued

Unfortunately, in the process, I had twisted my ankle, which meant sitting out most of the following week. Over the remaining 3, I had the chance to see more of what I was up against. While Finland itself may not produce that many soccer players, about half my teammates, and competition, came from as far away as Iraq, Mexico, Cameroon, and the Congo. Surprisingly, my speed, strength, and fitness were on par with the semi-pro players, and I easily outpaced almost all the amateur players at our fitness sessions. On the field, however, my lack of experience at a high-level was exposed, and I found myself outclassed and overwhelmed on far too many occasions. I was gaining ground with continued practice, but the end of pre-season was coming, and everyone knew there would be cuts as the roster was finalized. When the 4 weeks were up, I was informed that it would be my last practice.

I was disappointed, to say the least, but the news was no surprise. There were other teams I could still play for, and there was still the possibility of moving back up as my performance improved, and it was improving. Far more disappointing was an injury in my Achilles tendon from a week earlier. I had managed to keep playing despite the injury, but now that pre-season was over, my Achilles needed a rest. I'm learning hard way that tendons can take a long time to heal. It has now been 4 weeks with no soccer at all, and with less than a month before my visa runs out, my time playing soccer in Finland appears to be over.

Knowing how slim my chances were of getting a contract, a new visa, and playing soccer long term, I couldn't help but suspect that God had an alternate reason for allowing me to come here. Whatever it may be, He has not seen fit to reveal it yet. I won't pretend not to be frustrated. Finally being able to pursue my passion with focus and intensity was thrilling. Having that chance cut short just as spring arrives and while there is so much more soccer to be played is driving me up the wall. I especially enjoyed getting to know my teammates and being injured has cut off most of my social interaction beyond the walls of this house. The past few weeks have been a challenging time.

That said, I have much to be thankful for. I get to live with my best friend, and somehow, we have gotten along amazingly well. Octavio and Mari have been incredibly generous in allowing me to stay for so much time; I'm happy to have become the resident dishwasher. I've been treated to some spectacular winter scenery, both in Finland, and more recently on Norway's jaw-dropping northern coast. I get to experience real sauna culture, complete with snow rolling and frozen lake dipping, as well as the approach of 24-hour daylight. I'm also very thankful for the many faithful prayers that have gone up on my behalf. Just knowing that many of you are praying for me has been a great encouragement.

In just three short weeks, I'll be preparing to return to the U.S. Please continue to pray for me, for patience, peace, and the ability to truly trust God to do whatever He is doing. Pray that I might be a blessing and not a burden to Octavio and Mari. Pray that I would be disciplined and constructive with how I use my remaining time here.

Finland is a beautiful country, peaceful and rich in nature. God has been gracious to me, in allowing me to come for this time, even with the setbacks and letdowns. He has a plan and a purpose, for his glory and my benefit. I know this, because the Bible says so. I'm learning that seeing what God is doing while he is actually doing it may be a privilege reserved for only a few. The rest of us get to learn to trust His promises. So, pray for grace too, grace to trust Him more.

A Time to Pray Together

Cheryl Lanoue

"For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them."

Matthew 18:20

Electronic technology has given us a double-edged sword in our growth as disciples of Jesus Christ. We have online catalogs for just about every Christian book or course available. There are podcasts, free books online, live stream conferences, as well as thousands of sermons. Larger web sites provide us with the latest articles, reviews, blogs and information on the current trends in the contemporary church. No question, these resources are a great help. But even with all the best intentions and motivations, without exercising a degree of self-restraint, these good things can distract us from the better.

The means of grace God has provided will remain the same tomorrow as they are today and were yesterday - His Word, Prayer and Fellowship with one another. These are the gifts Christ has given us in the context of the local church. In his book, *Healthy Spiritual Growth*, Joel Beeke writes, "*Rowland Hill said, 'Some people's religion reminds me of a rocking horse, which has motion without progress'. Let's not be rocking horses; let us be plough horses for the Lord, pushing forward to accomplish the work before us, and war horses, pressing forward into the fight.*"

Until Christ returns, every generation will feel the press of the "already but not yet." Whether it's the political uncertainty of our times or the uncertainty of our own number of years, we should give thanks for each day God gives to us. But more than that, as followers of Jesus, we are called to treasure life in the "gathered church," our *Life Together*. In a book with that title, during the dark days of WWII, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote, "*...what is an unspeakable gift of God for the lonely individual is easily disregarded and trodden under foot by those who have the gift every day. It is easily forgotten that the fellowship of Christian brethren is a gift of grace, a gift of the Kingdom of God that any day may be taken from us, that the time that still separates us from utter loneliness may be brief indeed. Therefore, let him who until now has had the privilege of living a common Christian life with other Christians praise God's grace from the bottom of his heart. Let him thank God on his knees and declare: It is grace, nothing but grace that we are allowed to live in community with Christian brethren.*"

Megan Hill speaks to us today with the same compelling sense in her book, *Praying Together*, "*Our friends eagerly share the full range of our human experiences. They rejoice at our blessings. They weep at our losses. They listen to our stories. They tell us their stories in return. With our friends, we reveal our frailties, sins, desire, and hopes. How fitting then that we would also take all those things together to the Lord!*"

Join us the first and third Wednesday evening of the summer months, from 7:00-8:00 as we gather together as women to pray for our children, family and friends who do not know Jesus as their Lord and Savior. Join us as we "plough" and "war" together in this time of prayer. Join us as we believe Jesus' promise together and anticipate His presence with us as we pray for the advance of His Kingdom!

"So teach us to number our days, That we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Return, O Lord! How long? And have compassion on Your servants.

Oh, satisfy us early with Your mercy, That we may rejoice and be glad all our days!

And let the beauty of the Lord our God be upon us,

And establish the work of our hands for us;

Yes, establish the work of our hands."



GRACE CHURCH NEWS



Women at Prayer

As an outgrowth of our Women's Fellowship, women are invited to pray twice a month on Wednesdays through the end of the summer. The focus is unbelieving family and friends—the people God has put into our lives. Join us this **Wednesday evening, May 17th, from 7:00-8:00 p.m.**, at the church.



Spring Cleaning Workday

Come on out on **Saturday, May 20th** for our spring workday at the church. There are windows to be washed, yard work to be done, etc. Enjoy fellowship while we work together to spruce up for Spring! Coffee and refreshments will be available.

“Live Coals” Prayer Gathering

All are encouraged to join us for our monthly prayer gathering as we seek God's wisdom, guidance, and stamina for our part in His Kingdom work. This time of corporate prayer will take place on **Sunday evening, May 28th, from 5:00-6:00 p.m.**, in the sanctuary.



LOOKING AHEAD

Focus on Romania

Mark you calendars for **Sunday, June 4th**, when we will focus on Romania. Ciprian Droma, from Romania, will do special music during our worship service. Following a lunch at the church, Susan Stone, our missionary to Romania, will give us an update on her ministry there to young professionals.

Women's Fellowship Postponed

Due to scheduling conflicts, the Women's Fellowship will not meet this month. The next meeting will be **Saturday, June 10th from 9:30-11:00 a.m.** at the church. Learn and grow with us as we look at *Habits of Grace*, by David Mathis. Refreshments will be served.





2017

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
	1 7:00 Addictions Victorious	2 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	3 7:00 Women at Prayer	4	5 6:30 Young Adult Bible Study	6
7 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	8 7:00 Addictions Victorious	9 1:15 Ladies' Bible Class	10	11	12 6:30 Young Adult Bible Study	13
14 Mothers' Day 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	15 7:00 Addictions Victorious	16	17 7:00 Women at Prayer	18	19 6:30 Young Adult Bible Study	20 8:00 am Spring Spruce up Workday
21 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	22 7:00 Addictions Victorious	23	24	25	26 6:30 Young Adult Bible Study	27
28 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship 5:00 Live Coals Prayer	29 Memorial Day 7:00 Addictions Victorious	30	31			



Happy Mothers' Day