

Grace Notes



Grace Church Congregational
1055 Williams Street
Pittsfield, MA 01201

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Merry Christmas!

May God grant you a peaceful, joyful Christmas centered on His Gift to us!





From the Pastor's Desk

If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. (Romans 12:18)

I don't know about you, but I have found it awfully hard to watch the outflow of all that has gone on in Ferguson, Missouri over the past few months. For those of us who lived through the 1960's or the riots in the aftermath of the Rodney King trial it strikes too close to home. Not many are interested in a repeat of those days. Yet with the deaths of Michael Brown in Missouri and now the results of the investigation of the death of Eric Garner in Staten Island, it seems like things are spinning out of control.

I do not know enough about the facts to cast judgment on whether Officer Darren Wilson's safety was in danger enough to justify shooting Michael Brown, nor if officers Wilson or Pantaleo should be indicted. Speculation does little to get at the truth. But what we can all know with reasonable certainty is that the Michael Brown's mom and dad and the wife of Eric Garner must be broken hearted knowing they will never see their son or husband again. And I would assume that both the policemen involved would wish that none of this ever happened.

It's not just the tragedy of the deaths of two men, but the events that have transpired in the aftermath not just in Ferguson or New York, but across the country. It is one thing to express outrage at what we may believe to be gross injustice. It is another thing to vent that outrage by destroying the property of innocent people and calling it "collateral damage". All that does is more deeply entrench people's mistrust. And it is that factor of trust that seems to me to be the greatest casualty of this whole mess. How can trust be rebuilt, if there ever has been any trust, between the law enforcement community and especially the black community? That mistrust, I believe, cuts in both directions.

When we celebrate Advent, we think about one of the four titles prophetically applied by Isaiah to the promised Messiah—"Prince of Peace". When Isaiah uttered these words the people of God were at war—war with their neighbors and with themselves. The nation of Israel had split apart. The northern kingdom, Israel, had formed an alliance with the Syrians against their southern brethren, Judah. And Judah was considering an alliance with the Assyrians against the Israel-Syrian alliance. Trust was a virtually non-existent commodity. Against this backdrop, Isaiah doesn't just predict improved relations between warring administrations. He predicts the advent of a heavenly King, God himself, who would initiate a whole new reign of everlasting peace.

The history of the human race has been characterized by strife and animosity since the days of Cain and Abel. There has never been a time when there hasn't been conflict on the personal level or on the international level. That's because of the breakdown of relationship between man and God. Jesus' summarization of the Law, love God with your whole being and love your neighbor as yourself, has been replaced with vertical and horizontal alienation. It is into this mix that God promised to send his own Son to be the "Prince of Peace".

But, you say, the Israelites were God's covenant people. Why weren't they any different? It is because the promise was still pending; God's Son still needed to bear the cost of reconciliation.

So what about now? Jesus, unfolding the Law for us as he does from a hillside in Galilee, says, "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God*". He wasn't advocating some smarmy sentiment. He didn't have in mind some superficial "Just give peace a chance". He was talking about the hard demands of what it means to follow him as his disciple. Jesus knew full well what reconciliation would cost him. It cost him his life. Now He wants us to consider what it might cost us. That, I believe, is the key. So where do we begin?

Not all our law enforcement officials are disciples of Jesus, nor are all those who feel betrayed by the law. But you and I who profess the name of Jesus are. And for those of us who are, whether law enforcers or otherwise, does not reconciliation on the horizontal level begin with honesty and intentionality? Honesty in openly confessing that we ourselves continually stand in need of grace, and the intentionality of deciding that our own self-interests may need to be take second place for the sake of real peace.

Pastor Tom Bridgman



Missions Corner



News from the Carnevals— December 2014

This past year I (George) have been doing Bible study in Genesis. As I observed God calling Abraham out to follow Him, I saw that He also made a covenant with him. God repeatedly stated to Abraham that through his descendants (more than the stars and sands of the seas), “I will bless you, your dependents and the nations.” This covenant was passed on from Abraham to Isaac and Jacob. As I watched the events that happened in each of their lives, over and over God stepped in and protected His people and His covenant. All of the enemy forces designed to destroy God’s people and God’s covenant was protected by our faithful and trustworthy God. The excitement I see for my own life is that my God is faithful to His Word. I am a living light of His promise to “Bless the nations of the world”. Join me as I boldly step out this year and let my life shine to the nations by the power of our faithful and trustworthy God.

Likewise, I (Norine) have been reading Max Lucado’s book, *The Great House of God*. This covers the Lord’s Prayer phrase by phrase. I was most encouraged by Lucado’s thoughts about Satan, our opponent, as a servant of God. Lucado shares a few embarrassing personal stories of his school days and his attempts in playing sports. Max concludes that he had a knack for scoring for the opposing team. He decided then that sports should not be in his future. These debacles taught him to see the dilemma that Satan also finds himself in. Max writes, **“Every time he sets out to score one for evil, he ends up scoring a point for good. When he schemes to thwart the kingdom of God, he always advances it.”** Then Lucado takes the reader into the Bible and shows passage after passage of just how Satan worked against the lives of countless men and women, only to have the power of God override his work. *“Over and over the Bible makes it clear who really runs the earth. Satan may strut and prance, but it’s God who calls the shots.”* proclaims Lucado. This so encourages me. It is too easy to give our enemy more power than he really has. My Father has my life in His hands, and nothing formed against me can prosper, except to bring about the results that only Father desires. This fills me with peace.

We want to thank our Father for His amazing grace that sets a hedge around us. Nothing can come against us that His power cannot redeem. He is the All-powerful, All-knowing, All-present King and He calls us His Children! There is such security living in the Family of God. Not that bad things won’t happen, but we can be assured that *whatever happens*, He has it all under control. My God is my Hiding Place, my Strong Tower of Refuge, my Rock in a crazy world.

Our hearts are full of gratitude for the loving, unique, earthly family that our Father God has designed for us. We are overwhelmed to see how it is changing and growing. Two granddaughters and three grandsons, with two more grandsons being born in the spring of 2015. We praise Him for the callings He has given to each of our children. And we are amazed as He lays before them the individual paths He intends for them to follow.

We lift our hands in praise to our Father for the support team that He has given us. Those who share their finances with us and those who pray for us, and those who do both! We could not be in Texas, working with Wycliffe Associates, without these faithful friends. They have made it possible to serve with WA since 1988. We are rich, indeed, because of these individuals. Their support gives us the blessing of contributing to the work of Bible translation that is reaching the world with the Good News!

We thank our Father for his care, good health, safety on the job, provision and protection that covers us when we are not even aware of danger.

☑ Gratefully we greet the volunteers who return each year and treat us like family. Gratefully we welcome new workers who will come for the first time. Together we work and worship, joining together to share our skills and talents to the glory of God and for the building up of His Kingdom throughout the earth!

Member Services Building is now getting much needed repairs.

Wishing you a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year! *George and Norine*

A Math Lesson for Advent

In the devotional for children, *Thoughts to Make Your Heart Sing* by Sally Lloyd-Jones, we read:

“Do you know God Math? It’s nothing like ours! For instance, according to God Math:

5 loaves + 2 fish = enough food to feed 5,000 (+ leftovers)

1 lost sheep = as valuable as 99

Gideon was the leader of God’s army. But God told him, ‘Your army of 32,000 is way too large to defeat the Midianites.’ Too large? Wait. What?”

Shouldn’t the equation be instead, more = victory? When you look through Scripture you start to notice situations that don’t ‘add up’; consider the returning exiles in Nehemiah. God brought them back to Jerusalem to begin the hard work of rebuilding. How their minds must have reeled as they surveyed their devastated Jerusalem: its gates burned by fire, its temple a dusty heap of rubble? God’s message to them, “...*Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of hosts.*” (Zech.4:6) God’s test key doesn’t match ours! He says, “*One of your men puts to flight a thousand, for the LORD your God is He who fights for you, just as He promised you.*” (Josh. 23:10) Jesus knew. He thanked His Father that He had revealed to babes what He had not revealed to the wise and He called out to all those who ‘work to exhaustion’(weary), “*Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me...For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.*” (Matt. 11:29, 30)

If we’re honest, measuring and valuing like the world comes naturally to us. We make sense of things simply: 1+1=2. Our minds reject the concept of light burdens, easy yokes, 1>1000; no it doesn’t add up! But God, by His providence, catches hold of our arm saying, ‘Wait...listen to Me... this is the way I measure; this is how I value.’ We are caught up short, surprised by God’s ways! In the midst of the unexpected we confess, ‘Yes, He doesn’t think or work the way I do’. (Is. 55:8; Jer. 9:24)

The hunger for power, self-sufficiency, control, fame... is endemic to man. It’s easy to point at it in our culture but God shows us the same cravings lurk within our own hearts ready to manipulate our thoughts and influence our relationships with believers and unbelievers alike. We usually experience an urgency for “eyes to see” when we are pressed to the wall in unbelief, like Elisha’s servant in 2 Kings 6. They awoke one morning in Dothan to find they had been surrounded during the night by a pagan king’s great army. Elisha assured his distraught companion that ‘those who are with us are more than those who are with them’. That servant must have blinked twice at the prophet in utter disbelief. We don’t know, but Elisha prayed that God would ‘open his eyes that he might see’. “*So the Lord opened the eyes of the young man, and he saw, and behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.*” [0 visible help ~ uncountable heavenly host]

Smallness, weakness, poverty...dishearten and dismay because we see them as the insurmountable obstacles they are to men and women. No matter how it looks, the truth is, nothing in this sinful world hinders God. Paul explains: “*God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong,* (1 Cor. 1:27) When the builders had laid the foundation of the second temple some people shouted for joy but many priests and old men wept with a loud cry, for this building wasn’t even close to the glory and splendor of the first. Calvin says ‘they considered they toiled in vain because God would not dwell in a tent so mean’. Zechariah spoke to their unbelieving hearts, “*For who has despised the day of small things?...*” (4:10) “God indeed could put forth immediately his power, and thus rouse the attention of all men and fill them with wonder; he could indeed do so. His purpose is to in-

crease the brightness of his power,” continues Calvin, “which he does, when from a small beginning he brings forth what no one would have thought; and besides, his purpose is to prove the faith of his people; for it behooves us ever to hope beyond hope. Now when the beginning promises something great and sublime, there is no proof and trial of faith: but when we hope for what does not appear, we give due honor to God, for we depend only on his power and not on the proximate means.”

How do we know for sure God delights in small beginnings? Because the Son came to be ‘God with us’.. Jesus’ birth could have happened during the golden age of David’s house; instead God ordained that He should come when all splendor was gone - the King of glory, lying in a manger. Jesus appeared as an insignificant shoot from the stump of a kingdom cut down. We see Him in the Gospels, a man, wrapped in a towel and washing His disciple’s feet. Jesus died between two thieves and was buried in a borrowed tomb. He laid aside all of the things in one way or another we have desired for ourselves; power, riches, glory, fame. Why? *“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich.”* (2 Cor. 8:9) Jesus “emptied” Himself (Phil.2:7); God who came to live among us for a time, laid aside everything we would count as something and became in our estimations small, nothing. He became empty that we might be *“...filled up to all the fullness of God”*. (Eph. 3:19) With the old men in Jerusalem we weep that the Messiah would come to dwell in a ‘tent so mean’ with Mary we ask, ‘How can this be...’ The words of the angel Gabriel amaze our hearts as well, *“...for nothing will be impossible with God.”* Let us treasure the day of small beginnings as we consider our Savior, Christ the Lord during this Advent season.

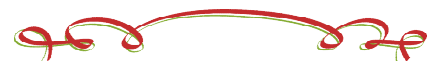
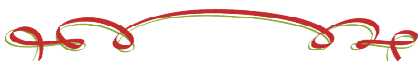
“God + nothing = everything
Everything – God = nothing”



Christmas Cheer

The Christmas holidays can be a lonely time for many people. Remember, too, those who are grieving. Look around and see who could use some encouragement and company at this time of year. A seemingly small gesture can go a long way. There are many things we can do to spread some joy and show the love of Christ: send a card, make a phone call, bake some cookies, make a meal, invite for tea or coffee, invite for dinner, shovel a sidewalk. Pray for opportunities, and act on them, in the name of Christ.

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers. Galatians 6:10



Your Labor Is Not in Vain

Work can often be frustrating, whether it is the work of raising children, providing for our families, or serving the church. Thorns and thistles entangle everything we do. In the midst of this frustration, Paul encourages us in I Corinthians 15:58, “Your labor is not in vain.” This is a potent and refreshing reminder that no matter how difficult or seemingly meaningless our work appears, it is meaningful to God because it brings Him glory, and for that reason, it is not in vain.

This statement comes at the end of the “resurrection chapter,” Paul’s most elegant and extensive commentary on the vital importance of the resurrection. Without the resurrection, there is no gospel, no hope, no meaning in life. All would be vanity, and the pagan poets proven true: “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die: (v. 32). Without the resurrection, Christians are the most pitiable fools in the world (v. 19), but because of the resurrection, neither our faith nor our work is in vain. Christ’s resurrection is the guarantee of our own resurrection. Yet it is more than that. It is also that which gives meaning to our lives in this world.

If we think backwards biblically, this makes sense. God created Adam to enjoy fellowship with God in the context of Adam’s work and rest. Everything, including work, was good before the fall, before sin scarred it all. That is why there are no perfect jobs or perfect families this side of heaven. They all bear the mark of Adam’s fall and need to be redeemed by the grace of God.

Ecclesiastes captures this very well. We might climb the highest ladders, surround ourselves with the trophies of success, and yet we will still feel the thorns of the curse upon the rose of our achievements. And in the end, our achievements blow away like the dust in the wind.

That picture would remain bleak and depressing were it not for the grace of God that not only triumphs over the curse but reverses it, in order that we might find a blessed joy and satisfaction in our work—whether it appears to be immediately fruitful or not.

This is accomplished in the resurrection. The resurrection is Christ’s vindication of not only His person but also His work. It sheds new light on all that Christ did, and new light on all that we do as well.

In I Corinthians 15:58, Paul is not just speaking to pastors or missionaries. It is to the whole church that he says that our work is “in the Lord” and thus not in vain. Perhaps if we would view our work by faith and not by sight, not as the world sees but as God sees, we would find joy in it, because we know we were created and redeemed to glorify and enjoy God in our work. When we look at our work through the lens of faith, we find joy and meaning as we realize that, through our union with the resurrected Christ, our labor is not in vain.

Rev. Eric B. Watkins is pastor of Covenant Presbyterian Church (OPC) in St. Augustine, Fla., a graduate of Westminster Seminary in California, and a PH.D. candidate at Kampen Theological University in the Netherlands.

TABLETALK OCTOBER 2014

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Submitted by Millie DeVos



GRACE CHURCH NEWS



Operation Christmas Child

Thank you to all who contributed in various ways to our Relay Center ministry for Operation Christmas Child this year. **A total of 1,504 shoe boxes came through our doors** on their way to millions of children around the world. As each box represents a Gospel Opportunity for a child and his or her family, please pray for the distribution of these boxes, that they will arrive safely and go to the child God intends. Pray for those distributing the boxes that they might see much fruit as a result of this ministry.

Gingerbread House-Making Party



Children and young people are invited to the home of Peter and JoAnn Kulberg, 9A High St., Lenox, for an afternoon of decorating gingerbread houses on **Thursday, December 11th**, starting at **3:00 p.m.** The houses will be given as gifts to people in need of encouragement. Please bring a bag of candy that can be used to decorate. Call 637-1075 if you plan to come.

Christmas Open House

Pastor Tom and Charleen invite the church family to stop by at their home for a Christmas Open House on **Sunday, December 14th**, anytime **between 12:30 and 4:00 p.m.** for refreshments and fellowship.

Men's Prayer Fellowship

All men of the church are invited to join together for discussion, prayer and fellowship on **Saturday morning, December 20th, from 7-8:30 a.m.** at the home of Doug Rose in Stockbridge. Light refreshments will be served.



A Service of Lessons and Carols

Please join us on **Sunday, December 21st at 6:00 p.m.** for a service of Scripture readings, carols, and special music. **This will take the place of our usual Christmas Eve service.** Invite a friend or neighbor for this special time as we celebrate the true meaning of Christmas.

Prayer Gathering

As we come to the end of one year and begin another, the elders encourage the congregation to join together for corporate prayer at the church on **Sunday evening, December 28th, from 5:00-6:00 p.m.** As a body, let's express our complete dependence on the Lord, thank Him for the blessings of this past year, and seek His direction for our part in His kingdom work in the year ahead.



Congratulations!

Congratulations are in order for Eve who passed, with honors, her comprehensive exams for the degree of M.A. in Language and Culture Studies from the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics. She writes, "Thank you each for all of your kind caring, encouragement, and prayers."



December 2014



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	<p>1</p> <p>7:00 Addictions Victorious</p>	<p>2</p> <p>1:15 Ladies' Bible Class</p>	<p>3</p>	<p>4</p>	<p>5</p>	<p>6</p>
<p>7</p> <p>9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship</p>	<p>8</p> <p>7:00 Addictions Victorious</p>	<p>9</p> <p>1:15 Ladies' Bible Class</p>	<p>10</p>	<p>11</p>	<p>12</p>	<p>13</p>
<p>14</p> <p>9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship</p> <p>Open House at Bridgmans' 12:30-4:00</p>	<p>15</p> <p>7:00 Addictions Victorious</p>	<p>16</p> <p>1:15 Ladies' Bible Class</p>	<p>17</p>	<p>18</p>	<p>19</p>	<p>20</p> <p>Men's Prayer Fellowship 7:00-8:30 a.m.</p>
<p>21</p> <p>9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship</p> <p>6:00 A Service of Lessons and Carols</p>	<p>22</p> <p>7:00 Addictions Victorious</p>	<p>23</p>	<p>24</p>	<p>25</p> <p>Christmas Day</p>	<p>26</p>	<p>27</p>
<p>28</p> <p>9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship</p> <p>5:00 Prayer Gathering</p>	<p>29</p> <p>7:00 Addictions Victorious</p>	<p>30</p> <p>1:15 Ladies' Bible Class</p>	<p>31</p> <p>New Year's Eve</p>	