

# Grace Notes



Grace Church Congregational  
1055 Williams Street  
Pittsfield, MA 01201

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*Merry Christmas!*

*May your Christmas be blessed and centered on Christ!*





## From the Pastor's Desk

*I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed...*

Which is more important, Christmas or Easter? Wrong question.

As I write this, we prepare to enter into the Advent season – the four weeks leading up to Christmas. Christmas decorations are going up in the neighborhood and holiday music through Walmart, not to mention the bell ringers by the door. In the church our attention turns to the incarnation of Jesus, when the Son of God took on human flesh and came to earth as an infant.

We can't really separate Christmas from Easter. Yes, I know they come at different times of the year, and even our ecclesiastical trappings differ for both holidays, but both are really about the gospel -that God sent his Son to be born as man (a baby) to go to the cross and then rise again. This was motivated by his desire to redeem us from the curse of sin.

Many of you know that I've been preaching through the book of Romans. You may be beginning to suspect that we will be at Romans for a long time. I guess we will; it's not a book we can blow through in short order. But the whole book is about one thing -the gospel. For that matter, the whole Bible is about the gospel.

Many people, especially those who don't know Christ, look at the Bible as a book full of rules and regulations, and methods for how to make ourselves better. While there are indeed many helpful principles for life contained in the Bible (especially Proverbs), it's really about that fact that we are all sinners and desperately in need of God's grace.

In last month's newsletter I addressed the topic of vision for Grace Church. The text from Romans 1 above is recognized as the touchstone of the Reformation. It is this text that God used to spark the Reformation. These are the words that opened Martin Luther's eyes to the gospel. Prior to Luther, the medieval church had lost its moorings and its connection to the gospel. It was through Luther and the other reformers that the gospel vision was restored. One of those reformers, John Calvin, wrote that the church must be "reformed and reforming", that is, allowing the gospel to shape us and shape our vision for the church.

There are numerous distractions in every age that will divert our vision from the gospel. Sadly, this is proving true in our own time. Our preoccupation with techniques for helping ourselves, and sure-fire methods for organizational success for our churches can cloud our eyes to the gospel itself. Not that many of these things can't be helpful, but if the message of the gospel is by-passed or diminished, then we've lost our primary vision, and we are in need of reformation.

As we anticipate a new year, let us pray that the gospel will be front and center in who we are as a church and

Pastor Tom Bridgman



# Missions Corner



## Operation Christmas Child

**Thank you** to all who contributed in various ways to our Drop-Off Location ministry for Operation Christmas Child this year. **A total of 1,105 shoe boxes came through our doors** on their way to millions of children around the world.

A total of 15 volunteers contributed over 123 hours to staff the Drop-Off during National Collection Week.

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.

**Do you ever wonder about the impact of a simple gift on the life of a child? Read on:**

### Nadia and a Doll

While growing up in Ukraine I lived in a three-bedroom apartment with my family of 11. Toys were rare in our neighborhood. I remember one of my neighbors showing me her doll from her balcony because it was too valuable to bring outside.

My father had a difficult time finding a job because he was the pastor of an underground church. Communism fell when I was 7, but Christians were still persecuted—even being thrown in jail for other people’s crimes. There were times when we had no food, but my mother would fast and stay up all night praying for God’s provision. He always came through for us, but when we sang “Jesus loves all the children of the world” at church, I wondered why he let some of us be poor.

One day while my dad was in the countryside preaching, my mom loaded all nine of us kids on a bus to take us to an [Operation Christmas Child](#) outreach event. I was 10 at the time. The first thing that stood out to me when we arrived were all the smiling people. In the Ukraine then, people weren’t happy. Though I was already a Christian, I felt like the people leading the event truly showed me the light and joy found in Christ.

As I received my shoebox gift along with all of my siblings, it was an answer to my mom’s prayers that God would provide. Inside my box, I found a doll wearing a dress and pink plastic heels. I was so surprised, I thought, *Is that for me?* I felt so special—so loved! I was delighted to share my new treasure with my friends. Every day, we played with the doll together outside. Each night, one of my friends took her home for a sleepover. This continued day after day.

I moved to the United States with my family at age 14. I grew up, went to school, and got married. Three years ago, I was in a Christian store that was giving away [empty Operation Christmas Child shoeboxes](#). As they encouraged people to pack them, I realized I was a shoebox recipient as a little girl.

From that point on, my husband and I and our three children began packing shoebox gifts to send to children in need. A year later, my parents started packing shoeboxes, too. They were like little kids as they filled the boxes. They were so excited to be a part of answering the prayers of other families around the world. I also recently learned that my doll—which I received more than 20 years ago—is still being enjoyed by family friends in Ukraine.

Today, I live in Ohio, and my prayer as I drop off my family’s shoeboxes is that God will work through our gifts and draw children closer to Himself. When I began speaking for Operation Christmas Child last year, I realized just how much of a spiritual difference my shoebox made in my life. It helped me experience God’s love and grow in my faith. I am grateful now to have the opportunity to share the importance of giving—in Jesus’ Name—with others.

*Editor’s note: It was a delight to meet Nadia in October in Saratoga, NY at an OCC workshop for Project Leaders*

## An Accessory or Our Life?

A month ago, I was contemplating the differences between African and American culture. I now have spent six months in the USA with my wife, after having been immersed in life on the African Continent for a year and a half without returning home. Most people would consider it an understatement to say that “going without” is a major part of rural African life. Everyday commodities such as internet, electricity, modern plumbing, and clean water are often scarce or completely absent. Life in general requires sacrifice and a lot of physical effort for every day.

In the midst of the challenges of the day to day, I was always amazed at the joy and energy that my dear brothers, sisters, and family displayed in my now beloved home of South Sudan. Laughter and good-natured humor could be heard in the midst of digging under the blazing sun or in a conversation with someone suffering with a multi-seasonal malaria. The hard, but simple life brought a natural appreciation for the seemingly small gifts. There were a lot less distractions and, with so little that was actually in your control, depending and trusting on God seemed to come with less resistance.

Returning, I couldn't help but compare the breakneck pace of our modern society and was overwhelmed. The distractions and complexity of life were a mountain, compared to my daily routine of preaching on the radio, handwashing my clothes, and carrying cooking/bathing water for my wife from the borehole. The Thanksgiving and Christmas seasons often highlight the busyness that we can get caught up in. As I looked around me, I was shocked by how much the details of life were often taking priority from our very walk with Jesus. The observation that hit me was that Jesus often becomes an accessory in our lives. There are many things in our lives, even good things, that become top importance and often take first place over drawing close to our Lord Jesus through prayer, reading the word, and serving others.

Now, apart from God's grace, this would be an angry diatribe from a self-righteous missionary against the evils of American society, but the Lord kindly turned my finger directly back to me. I was seeing the diverted focus of others around me, until God quietly asked me a simple question:

“What are you doing right now?”

I looked down at my running shoes as they pounded the pavement and noticed that I was breathing hard as I pushed out the last few miles of a long run. On most days it would take a pretty large chain to keep me away from my daily morning exercise routine. In that moment I had to admit (with some cringing) that I was religiously devoted to my physical fitness and the time spent in the lap of my heavenly father was often lopsided in its shortness. My satisfaction was in what I could make myself to be, not in my identity as a child of God through what Jesus Christ had done on my behalf.

I would often read the words of the apostle Paul in Philippians 3:7-8:

*“But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. <sup>8</sup> Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ”*

For many years I have reflected on this scripture and desired that this would be true of me. I had mistakenly thought that good parts of my life were counted as “rubbish”, but in that humble moment I was able to see where my allegiance truly was and in many ways my walk with the Lord was subconsciously an add-on.

*Continued on next page*

*Accessory cont'd*

This is not a western or cultural problem, but a universal human problem. We all get our attention divided by things that we think will make us happy, forgetting the True Source of our happiness. It is just as true in the craziness of the Christmas rush in America, as it is in a family harvesting sweet potatoes in rural South Sudan or Uganda.

Certainly, illegal drug and alcohol abuse is wreaking havoc in lives all over the world and I have seen the collateral damage first hand in S. Sudan. However, the good things of this life, such as family, ministry, and good health, can be equally effective in turning our focus away from our Savior Lord Jesus as our life and source of everything.

If you are anything like me, you may feel a growing sense of inadequacy. It seems impossible to keep Jesus as the focus and purpose of life and not a “multi-vitamin” or accessory for a happy life. Sin and my flesh wages a war inside me on a daily basis (Romans 7:21-23) and I find myself focusing on what doesn't matter and not turning to what should be the center of my attention (Romans 7:18-19). We know that the purpose of a believer's life is that Jesus be glorified in every action and word (1 Peter 4:11) and when we fall short, there is hope!

For those who have been called by Christ, there is no condemnation (Romans 8:1). We can be overjoyed over how Paul continues in Philippians 3:9-11:

*“and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—<sup>10</sup> that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death,<sup>11</sup> that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”*

Our ability to make Jesus our life comes through The Life which poured out His very blood for us. We have the Lamb of God's righteousness and it is this unstoppable power that is working within us. Making our spiritual priorities right does **NOT** start by promising ourselves that we will stop our earthly affections on the spot and only get satisfied through Christ. Instead, it requires confessing our total inability and asking Jesus to do what we cannot do. Our faith and trust rests in the one who conquered sin and death and not in our own will power.

The changes of our heart and the allegiances we make will not change overnight. The first time I saw that physical fitness had become an ultimate thing was in 2010 and it has been an almost daily struggle since then. I may not fully surrender this overemphasis and false satisfaction until I finally am physically held in my dear Savior's arms, but I know He is walking with me every step of the way. On a daily basis I try to remember to ask the Lord for what specific actions I can take to put Him first in that day and pray for the power to follow through.

When I get discouraged and see my idols take control for the thousandth time, I remember these words:

“Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? <sup>25</sup> Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24-25a)

“He delivered us from such a deadly peril, and he will deliver us. On him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again.” 2 Corinthians 1:10

*Jonathan Lueken*

## THANKFUL HEARTS

There are many blessings and singular answers to prayer to thank God for this year. James reminds us that “every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above”. We can also thank God for the difficult things He has sovereignly placed in our lives. “For all things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God.” [2 Cor. 4:15]. Through all the details of our lives runs the scarlet thread of the Gospel of Jesus Christ enabling true thankfulness.

The Gospel, at once, confronts and embraces us in love. It declares to all, the offensive truth: you have sinned and fallen short of God’s glory; [Rom 3:23] the wage due you is death [Rom. 6:23a]. Yet, against this bleak backdrop shines a love too incredible to have imagined: “...but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.” [Rom. 6:23b]. We proclaim this Gospel to the world and we must never stop professing it to each other. We are called to ‘speak the truth in love and grow up in Christ’. [Eph. 4:15].

‘In Christ, we who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ’ [Eph. 2:13]. We are born again, ‘new creatures’, growing up into new Life. Our existence is wrapped up in Jesus – ‘in Him we live and move and have our being’. “For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him, and through Him to reconcile all things to Himself, having made peace through the blood of His cross” [Col. 1:19,20].

Like the plant that sits on our windowsill, ‘growth’ in our lives often seems undetectable. We are daily engaged in the ‘good fight of faith’ as we wrestle with the reality of the Gospel and struggle to walk by faith in God’s promises. But nothing can separate us from Christ. And ‘though our ‘bodies are dying’, ‘our inner self is being renewed day by day’ [2 Cor. 4:16]. So, we must not lose heart! Christ has demonstrated His utter love for us. He has atoned for our sin and brought us to Himself “that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle...holy and blameless.” [Eph. 5:27]. So we can sing with Horatius Bonar:

*Upon a Life I have not lived,  
Upon a Death I did not die,  
Another’s Life; Another’s Death,  
I stake my whole eternity.*

Someday, maybe soon, we will hear a multitude crescendo in praise and Thanksgiving, “Worthy is the Lamb who was slain” [Rev. 5:12]. Until that Day, let us thank God with all our hearts, and encourage each other as John did, “now we are children of God, and it has not appeared as yet what we will be.” But this we can be assured of, “when He appears, we will be like Him, because we will see Him just as He is.” [1 Jn. 3:2]

*“God’s love is the most awesome thing about Him. It is not His justice, nor His majesty, nor even His blazing holiness, but the fact that He has made and keeps a covenant of personal commitment and love to His people.” Sinclair Ferguson*

*Cheryl Lanoue, from the blog at [www.gracecongregational.org](http://www.gracecongregational.org)*



# GRACE CHURCH NEWS



## Grace Fellowship for Women

Enjoy encouraging fellowship as we look into the Scriptures and apply its truth to our lives at the monthly Grace Fellowship for Women on **Saturday, December 2nd**. Meet at the church from **9:30-11:30 a.m.** as we study I Peter , discuss, and pray together.



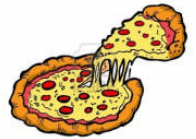
## Men's Prayer Fellowship

All men of the church are invited to join together for Bible study, discussion, prayer and fellowship on **Saturday morning, December 16th, from 7-8:30 a.m.** at the home of Doug Rose in Stockbridge. Breakfast will be served.



## Pizza and a Movie

The junior high and high school Sunday school class is invited to the Bridgmans' home for pizza and a movie (*Mully*, an inspirational true story of a Kenyan man who gave up much to follow God's call to serve orphans in his country). Come at **5:00 p.m., Sunday, December 17th** and feel free to bring a friend!



## A Service of Lessons and Carols

Please join us on Christmas Eve **Sunday, December 24th at 6:00 p.m.** for a service of Scripture readings, carols, and special music. Invite a friend or neighbor for this special time as we celebrate the true meaning of Christmas.



## New Year's Eve Fellowship

Pastor Tom and Charleen invite you to come on over **Sunday, December 31st, New Year's Eve** for a time of food and fellowship (with games!) Bring an appetizer-type dish to share, beverage, or dessert, and your favorite game. A sign-up sheet will be provided for attendance and food contributions. Starting time to be announced.





# December 2017



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					1	2 9:30-11:30 am <b>Grace Fellowship for Women</b>
3 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship <b>5:00 Live Coals Prayer</b>	4 7:00 Addictions Victorious	5 1:00 Ladies' Bible Class	6	7	8	9
10 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	11 7:00 Addictions Victorious	12 1:00 Ladies' Bible Class	13	14	15	16 7:00-8:30 a.m. <b>Men's Prayer Fellowship</b>
17 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship	18 7:00 Addictions Victorious	19 1:00 Ladies' Bible Class	20	21	22	23
24 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship <b>6:00 p.m. Christmas Eve Service</b>	25 <i>Christmas Day</i> 	26	27	28	29	30 
31 9:30 Sunday School 10:45 Worship <i>New Year's Eve Fellowship</i>						