

in vain. Sometimes our ministry feels like standing still, but with Christ, we know those efforts are actually how we run the race of faith.

Three years from now, who knows what will have happened in the life of our church? In the community where we live and serve? Our budget might not look great on paper. Our membership rolls may not budge. But that does not mean we have labored in vain. Because we do not accept the grace of Christ in vain. We receive it with deepest gratitude and with hearts wide open, ready to be transformed in the subtle ways of the Spirit. If people are discovering a way to follow Jesus that affirms neighbors and reaches out in love, then we are doing it right. If people are being fed by the small but tangible efforts of this church against hunger, then we are being transformed by God. If people are finding community here that reminds them they are not alone in this world, then God will be praised.

None of that means we have achieved everything or we are doing it all correctly. None of that may look like much on paper or in the metrics of the world. There is always room for us to open ourselves more deeply to the leading of the Spirit. But those signs also declare that our faith is not futile or ineffectual. We cannot succumb to the cynicism that tells us just because something *looks, on its surface*, like failure or sorrow or death that it is only that. Because so often, God shows us that in the midst of those things, there is also goodness and rejoicing and life. There are good results, happening slowly, in surprising and sometimes hidden ways. We may appear to have very little, but if we have love, if we have the grace of God, if we have the community which Christ has given, then it turns out, we are like Paul. We actually possess everything.

All glory and honor, thanks and praise be to God. Amen.



First Presbyterian Church
of Royal Oak

June 23, 2024

Fifth Sunday after Pentecost

“Not In Vain”

Rev. Emma Nickel

Scripture: 2 Corinthians 6:1-13

At the beginning of our passage, it says, “do not accept the grace of God in vain.” We know that the grace of God is a free gift to us from the start. God offers us grace with a purpose. God intends to free us from the things that break us down and tear humanity apart. God’s grace is meant to love us back into wholeness. What matters most is how we accept and respond to the grace. So when Paul warns us not to accept it in vain, what does that mean exactly? Well to do or receive something *in vain* means that it has no effect, no result. We do it, but it’s useless; our action doesn’t achieve anything. So if we receive God’s grace, and nothing happens in our lives, then we’ve received it in vain. Or worse, it might seem like God has given it in vain.

When grace has a good result, we can celebrate. Whether it’s in our lives or someone else’s. But can we always identify what a good result is? Do we know it when we see it, or do we always see it? A good result doesn’t look the same as worldly success. A good result of grace might be sacrifice. It might be something that doesn’t put *us* ahead at all, but rather helps us to serve. A good result of grace might actually cost us something. The results might be subtle; slow; small; sometimes even hidden. When we respond to grace in the way God intends, then we may do things that other people have trouble understanding.

I read a story a few months ago that had a result like this. A result that seemed costly, but which was surely tied up in grace. Fisher folk in Pakistan, who are very poor, have begun participating in a World Wildlife Fund project to track river dolphins in the Indus River.¹ This endangered species only lives in the Indus River, one of the world’s most polluted waterways. Numbers of the dolphins have increased slightly in recent years, but they are still very threatened. And it doesn’t help their case that they’re not cute like bottlenose dolphins.

1 Dīaa Hadīd, “An endangered river dolphin finds an unlikely savior: fisherfolk,” NPR, January 7, 2024, <https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2024/01/07/1223055617/an-endangered-river-dolphin-finds-an-unlikely-savior-fisherfolk>

These dolphins compete for the same meager hauls of fish that the fisher folk need to support their own lives and families. In many ways, the people should be at odds with the dolphins. More dolphins eating fish can mean fewer fish for the people to catch. As it is, on a good day, a fisherman says he receives \$7 for his catch, which he spends to support his family within a few days. "It's difficult to survive. We don't meet our needs." Another fisher woman says, "When we protect dolphins, we catch less fish." And yet now she, and others like her, are recording every sighting of a dolphin, whether dead or alive. They make note of it on a chart or phone the World Wildlife Fund with the information, which is helping protect the overall population. Some people are receiving small payments for their efforts, but even without those, the community as a whole has embraced this conservation effort.

At first glance, the community's efforts appear to be harming their own fortunes. But like with the grace of God, we have to look closer to understand the result. As one woman says, "We protect the dolphin because it is the creature of God. We feel happy when we protect them. Dolphins are our friends." Her own children may have less to eat if there are more dolphins. But in the long run, her family's flourishing is bound up with the flourishing of the dolphins. Because when there are enough fish to feed a population of river dolphins, there's likely to be more fish for the people to catch, too. The effect is slow and takes a long time. Just when it seems like the task was done in vain, we realize that slowly, in an unexpected way, a good result is emerging.

When we accept the grace of God with gratitude and joy, then our lives will absolutely be changed. Our attitudes are changed, our reasons for doing things shift, our approach to everyday tasks feels different. But those results may not be obvious to others. They may not even appear sensible. A lot of times, living by grace is not efficient. It doesn't result in tangible effects that are easily measured. Like the people who choose to care for the dolphin, perhaps even at a cost to their own livelihoods, they are doing it for a greater purpose. Their actions are not done in vain.

In the passage, Paul says that people treated him as if his ministry was ineffectual or useless. They treated him as if he was an imposter, unknown, dying, punished, sorrowful, poor, having nothing. Scripture makes it clear; he *did* suffer. And yet, Paul says, none of those conditions defined him. Though his ministry seemed to be in vain, by the grace of God, it was not. His sharing of the gospel was purposeful, life-giving, thriving, even. It's simply that we have to measure the result differently, look at his life and its effects through the lens of faith, in order to see that.

Today we are marking a changeover in our leadership at the church. Our outgoing class of elders and deacons are winding down their service. And today we're ordaining and installing a new class of leaders, which means blessing them and praying for them, as their service begins this summer. Most terms of service are three years in our church. So the people finishing up are looking back on the last three years of ministry. And a question may emerge, "did I do all this in vain? What's been accomplished during my time?" It's a question many of us ask in our lives - about our work, or maybe about our parenting.

Well, those folks were ordained and installed in an outdoor worship service in June of 2021, one where we were still not even touching each other because of the pandemic. Instead of laying hands on each other, we showed the connection by holding the ends of red ribbons as we prayed. It was still early days of figuring out life 'after the pandemic.' We did not yet know who would come back to church post-Covid, or who would continue staying home. We didn't know when we would begin worshiping inside our building again, or if we'd ever share a meal together here. But what has happened in those three years, by the grace of God, is a lot. Even though we may forget or it may not be immediately obvious. These leaders' service and ministry, the ministry of our whole congregation, has not been in vain.

We have doubled our children's ministry in those years, adding new families and new young disciples who sing and learn and laugh and lead *us* in worship. Our Vacation Bible School starts tomorrow and we have thirty-three children signed up. Just a few years ago, I think we had barely ten.

Our church has buried saints together with dignity and with hope in the resurrection, ministering to their families with hospitality at countless receptions.

We have achieved a long-term goal of selling that parking lot, and finding resources that we can use to improve our facility into the future.

We have accompanied a family from Afghanistan whose life was upended in the course of a few hours several years ago. And earlier this month, the oldest son in that family invited some of our co-sponsorship team to his 8th grade graduation. Our church members were the important people in his life, besides his family, with whom he wanted to share that milestone. You can't quantify results like that. The way of the world would ask, "was there a return on the thousands of dollars and hundreds of hours we put into helping their family? Will they stay ahead of the bills and learn English like we hope?" We can't say for sure. But we can absolutely say that all those efforts, which served Christ by serving our neighbors, were not done