

Grace Through Service

Jennifer Lewis Priestley

Talk at the volunteer dinner for the Episcopal Archdiocese – April 22.

It is an honor to have the opportunity to speak to you. And, as a member of the Cathedral, thank you for the gifts of your time, talent and intellectual energy to this Cathedral community. Your volunteer service makes this Cathedral an even better place to be a part of.

Wallace asked me to come and speak briefly about the themes of Grace, Excellence and Hospitality – these are the core values of our community that are woven into so much of what we do.

I would like to reflect on the specific dimension of Grace...and even more specifically on Grace through Service.

As I was organizing my thoughts for this evening, I had dinner with a very close friend from New Hampshire this past week. He describes himself as Agnostic. And he asked me one of those questions that you may have gotten from your kids when they were young – sort of a “why

is the sky blue”-type question. He asked “Why do you go to church?...I don’t get it”. I sat there for a minute and very quickly processed the implications of one of many potential responses...I could have started down a very theological discussion related to the concept of an “uncaused cause” as the basis for the universe...I could talk about the concept of “the truth is one but the paths are many” and we develop an understanding of truth through a defined path of ritual and practice...I could talk about helping my children develop a moral compass...I could have said, I just like going to church...

In the end, I just said something superficial about living in the south...and that’s what we do. The conversation then moved on...

I have been reflecting on that question...why do I come to church? The reality is I don’t think about NOT coming to church. This is why the question caught me off guard. In the end, I don’t think my answer was very satisfactory for him or for me.

Thinking about the question again, if I had an opportunity to revisit the conversation, I think I would have reframed it...I think a better question

is...why do I contribute my time and my very limited talents to this church community or really more broadly to any community?

The reframing of this question also pivots the discussion from a very passive interaction – expecting to receive something just by sitting in a pew for an hour – versus an active engagement – having to spend a few hours preparing a lecture at the OFSS or taking time out on a Saturday morning for a discernment committee meeting. Or the hours that I know many of you spend on incredible events like the Cathedral Antique Show or on quiet but very important service guilds like the funeral guild or the function that I appreciated more than any other during an earlier chapter of my life – the nursery support during the service!

Reframing the question from one of passive engagement to one of active engagement leads, I think, to a truer answer. And provides for a better context for a meaningful conversation around Grace.

As a teacher, every once in a while I get these notes...sometimes through email, sometimes through LinkedIn...sometimes I even get handwritten notes...that say something like “I had you as my professor

in 2006...and today I am a Vice President of operations at XYZ company...and I attribute my success to what I learned from you in the classroom”. By the way...if you have never sent one of your teachers a note like this...go home and do it today...because we live for these. Because teachers, including most state university professors, are rarely overpaid. We don't do these jobs for the money...and these kinds of notes go a long way.

These kinds of notes are important because it reminds me that I am making a difference...that what little I am able to bring into the classroom is impacting people's lives. Its difficult to have that perspective when I am editing articles, developing lecture notes...when I am living “in my own head”...when I am 100% focused on the theory in my discipline...its not very rewarding. Yes, having academic papers accepted for publication in the academic journal of grand esoterica is nice...but getting a letter from a former student that I helped to frame his career path – THAT'S why I go to work everyday.

It reminds me of an oft told story about a young man walking down the beach – when he noticed an older man picking up starfish which had been stranded by the retreating tide and throwing them back into the sea one by one. The young man walked up to him to ask him what he was doing. The older man explained that if the starfish were exposed to the sun they would die. The young man then said “But the beach goes on for miles and there are thousands of starfish. You can’t possibly save them all. How can your efforts make a difference?” The older man paused and looked at the starfish in his hand, and threw it into the sea and said “To *this* one – it made a difference”.

At our university, like most universities, students in our program are required to engage in a “capstone” project – the students will partner with a local company to find a solution to a real world problem. They have to take what they have been doing in the classroom and learn how to apply the theory, the concepts and the programming to a real business problem – where they cannot turn to the back of the book and find the answer – in fact there may not even be an answer. The students are

required to work in teams – these teams are comprised of students from a wide variety of disciplines. Currently I have graduate teams that include kids from Statistics, from Engineering, from Computer Science, from Information Systems and from the MBA program...all working together. They all see the problem from a different perspective...they all have a slightly different lens. They don't always get along...they don't always agree. But ultimately, they are tied together through a common grade – it's a big incentive to work together.

Without fail, in these practicums, the students tell me that they learn more from each other than they do from me. That's ok. That's what's supposed to happen. The students take the theory from the classroom and put it into action through the team-based projects. Their experience with the theory and the concepts is much more meaningful as a result of their practical and team-based engagement. Ultimately I suspect that it is the experiences on these kinds of projects that they remember most after graduation – much more so than what they learned passively listening to me drone on for an hour and fifteen minutes twice a week.

And importantly, they are learning the latent skills – and experiencing the unexpected benefits – of learning how to be productive in the context of a multi disciplinary work team – and learn how to value the talents of others to a larger purpose.

Here at St Philip, I attend service (almost) every Sunday. Secretly, my favorite service is at 7:45 in the chapel – but you are most likely to see the Priestley’s at the 8:45 service...getting the Priestley children up in time for 7:45 is rarely a winning proposition. I see going to church as the equivalent of my students attending class – its through the mass that I consistently hear the concepts and the lessons of the old and new testament. I like the ritual and the tradition. But it’s a more “theoretical” engagement – the experience is very much in my head.

I have volunteered in a few capacities here – I think I have taught every level of Sunday school...I have been on a discernment committee...I participate in the summer series...but my favorite engagement is the homeless dinner and requiem. This past November I helped serve the womens’ prison choir. It was really moving for me.

This is sort of my practicum. I learn more about my faith – and have a deeper experience of my faith – when I volunteer. It allows me to put my faith into action in a very tangible way. And it's through service and volunteering that I experience Grace.

If I am having this conversation with my friend again...I think the follow up question would be – what is Grace? While there are lots of definitions, there are two explanations that resonate with me.

The first is that grace can be defined as the unmerited or undeserving favor of God. In his book “The Cost of Discipleship” Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the inspirational Lutheran pastor, theologian and Nazi Dissident discusses this concept of grace. Specifically, he makes a distinction between "cheap" and "costly" [grace](#). According to Bonhoeffer, cheap grace is...the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, [baptism](#) without church, [communion](#) without [confession](#). Cheap grace is grace without [discipleship](#)...It is passive and unengaged. In contrast to cheap grace, costly grace confronts us as a gracious call to action, it comes as a

word of forgiveness to the broken spirit and the contrite heart. It is costly because it requires us to engage and sacrifice – sacrifice our time, our energy...and order (subordinate) our wants and desires. In both contexts we can encounter grace...but the “cheap” or the theoretical grace can feel like getting the participation trophy – it is unearned. It is through our engagement in our community and through self sacrifice that we experience “costly” or engaged grace – we have to meet God halfway. Its through the engagement that we have a deeper more meaningful experience. Much like my students and their projects.

In the book “Grace Through Practice” Paul Zahl, an Episcopal Priest and Dean of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry in PA, writes that Grace is experienced when we practice what he calls “One Way Love” – which I read as another definition of Bonhoeffer’s costly grace – that it reflects a decision on the part of the giver to “love” the receiver without any regard to the “deservedness” of the receiver. He takes the reader through relatable examples of one way love in the context of marriage, parenting...politics and social policy...and even in the mall. With every

anecdote and example, he illustrates that the most meaningful and “grace-filled” events in our lives were likely a result of us practicing one-way love.

The second perspective on grace is more humanistic. We are living in a world that is sadly increasingly digitized...and ironically with all of our connected devices, this digitization is contributing to individual isolation. The suicide rates for teens and young adults continues to increase – at an increasing rate. According to the CDC, suicide rates for both the 15-24 and 25-34 age groups hit record highs in 2017 – the two groups that are most engaged in social media. My friend posited that we experience grace through our collective human connections. Something that we took for granted in previous generations. It is now through human connections that we experience God’s grace when we give to each other our time, our compassion unconditionally...it comes back to Matthew 18:20 – *“For where two or three gather together in My name, there am I with them”*. Engaging each other – serving one another enables an encounter with Grace.

So...back to the original question – Why do I go to church? And the pivoted question - why do I contribute my time and my very limited talents to this church (or any) community?

I go to church to learn – like my students I don't learn every week – but with practice and ritual I am able to increasingly create the absorptive capacity to learn and hopefully progress closer to the truth.

But I volunteer my time and my talents – I engage with my community here – because it is through these engagements that I experience Grace and my faith in a much deeper way. Frequently, I learn more from engaging with you guys than I do sitting in the pew.

And, I hope that through my small contributions, I am saving some starfish along the way.