

From the Pastor

I just recently noticed that I have two pieces of art on my study walls here at church that play off of each other. One, directly across from my desk, is a quote from Meister Eckhart in calligraphy, illustrated by a sort of sunburst in gold: "The first outburst of everything God does is compassion." The other is on the wall in back of my desk. It's a painting a friend of mine did for me, knowing that I needed to be reminded. Painted in black against a background of sunset colors is "Embrace Grace." It seems like you could read them one after another and then reverse the order. "Embrace Grace" because "the first outburst of everything God does is compassion." And then, "The first outburst of everything God does is compassion" so "embrace grace."

Both of these are hard for most of us. We might believe the first outburst of everything God does is compassion, but not truly let it sink in that God's compassion is for us. And we might think embracing grace is of course what we Christians should do, except we are so oriented toward performance and merit we seldom let ourselves be embraced by God's compassion or grace in Christ. But what I think about more and more is how little effort is required of us. It is all gift: it's all given. Consider this from Romans 5:

"God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us."

Rev. Bruce Reyes-Chow often says that Christian beliefs like this are just this simple and just this complex, or this easy and this hard. Because what if you do it? What if you choose to embrace grace, or accept that the first outburst of everything God does is compassion? What then? What might life be like when we accept



that we are indeed surrounded by God's compassion?

My friend didn't create that "Embrace Grace" art to show up in a church newsletter when she created it 6-7 years ago. The artist who created the Meister Eckhart piece doesn't even know that I bought it, let alone that it hangs on my wall.

So neither of these folks know that what they created still produces reminders of God's grace, still produces reminders to me to live as though God's grace in Christ is real and compassionate. (Because it is.) Nor did Meister Eckhart have any idea, back in the late 13th century, early 14th, that centuries later a woman <gasp!> would be taking his insight to heart in her pastor's study at a Presbyterian church. (What do you mean "Presbyterian?" What do you mean, "Reformation?!") My point is this: the outbursts of God's grace in your own actions continue to have life way into the future. You have no idea how much impact you will have. Meister Eckhart couldn't have known that there would be a soul hundreds of years in the future who would read his words while tears come to her eyes because in those words she heard the gospel of Jesus Christ.

This is yet another reason to nurture the gifts that God has given you. What you are equipped to do, what you enjoy doing, the ways you love to serve God, the things you can do that help the congregation, are all ways that God's grace gets carried into the world. I want to offer you some questions for reflection that we found helpful in Bible study this past week. These are from the March-April 2025 issue of *The Upper Room Daily Devotional Guide*:

1. How do you remind yourself of the gifts God has given you and the ways God has blessed you? How do you show your gratitude for these gifts and blessings?
2. How have the ways you serve God changed over the course of your life? Why have they changed?

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3. Name a time when you were blessed by the gift of someone's service to God. What gift is God calling you to use in service to others today?

As I mentioned in a recent Midweek email, these gifts, the ways we communicate the grace of Christ in word and deed, are how the love of the body of Christ grows and steadies us as a community. From Ephesians 4:

I urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift.

.....so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine..... Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

What I'm writing about here requires an enormous amount of trust in the Holy Spirit. I myself struggle with this, as I know most of us do. We want evidence: how do we know that what we do is actually building up the body of Christ? Or is it actually a way of communicating the grace of Jesus Christ? How do we accept that God is at work when we can't see everything God is doing, or understand it?

All I can say is that trust in God is hard. Our Christian faith entails living as though God is the one who sees all and loves all, and who is at work through the Spirit. All I can say is that we have to practice that trust. One way to do that is to recall our own experience of Christ's grace. When have people brought Christ's grace to us? Or when did we see it in action in ways we wouldn't expect?



I have shared the following story before. When I was teaching at Augustana College, decades ago, I team-taught a senior capstone course on Economics and Ethics. One of the things we required students to do was to sign up for a slot to prepare, serve, and clean up after dinner at a men's shelter for day laborers.

One group of four guys were mad about it. "We didn't get help to get here, why should we help them?" Of course they did have a lot of help, including parents who could help pay for cars and college education. In any case, they reluctantly did their duty, and they had a life-changing experience. As the men came back from their work for the day, they turned on the TV to watch professional wrestling. The students heard it from the kitchen, which meant they also heard the conversation about who was going to beat who and who was the best and so on. These four guys happened to be very into professional wrestling.

They couldn't help themselves, and they jumped into the conversation and joined the friendly arguments and just had a blast. They came back to class having realized how much they had in common with people who had much less than they did, and how fun it was. One of them started a soup kitchen in his hometown that is still going today.

So, professional wrestling carried the grace of Christ as that little temporary community was being built up in the bonds of love. Grace came to those students and those men, they embraced it in their midst, and the outburst of what God did became compassion.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit,

Pastor Michelle

Holy Week Scripture Readings from the Revised Common Lectionary

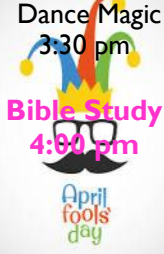
Holy Week Year C	First reading	Psalm	Second reading	Gospel
<u>Monday of Holy Week</u> Apr 14, 2025	Isaiah 42:1-9	Psalm 36:5-11	Hebrews 9:11-15	John 12:1-11
<u>Tuesday of Holy Week</u> Apr 15, 2025	Isaiah 49:1-7	Psalm 71:1-14	1 Corinthians 1:18-31	John 12:20-36
<u>Wednesday of Holy Week</u> Apr 16, 2025	Isaiah 50:4-9a	Psalm 70	Hebrews 12:1-3	John 13:21-32
<u>Maundy Thursday</u> Apr 17, 2025 <i>Holy Thursday</i>	Exodus 12:1-4, (5-10), 11-14	Psalm 116:1-2, 12-19	1 Corinthians 11:23-26	John 13:1-17, 31b-35
<u>Good Friday</u> Apr 18, 2025	Isaiah 52:13-53:12	Psalm 22	Hebrews 10:16-25 or <i>Hebrews 4:14-16; 5:7-9</i>	John 18:1-19:42
<u>Holy Saturday</u> Apr 19, 2025	Job 14:1-14 or <i>Lamentations 3:1-9, 19-24</i>	Psalm 31:1-4, 15-16	1 Peter 4:1-8	Matthew 27:57-66 or <i>John 19:38-42</i>
<i>Italicized readings, complementary to the standard reading, may be used with, or in place of it.</i>				

What happened at Session?

Session did not meet in the month of March. Stay tuned for our May newsletter for information from the April Meeting.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH CALENDAR



Sun	Mon	Tue	Wed	Thu	Fri	Sat
		1 Dance Magic 3:30 pm Bible Study 4:00 pm 	2 Youth Group 5:00-6:30pm	3 Bridge Club 12:00pm	4	5 AA-Alcoholics Anonymous 7:00 pm
6 Worship 9:30 am Communion	7	8 Dance Magic 3:30 pm Bible Study 4:00 pm	9 Youth Group 5:00-6:30pm	10 Bridge Club 12:00pm	11	12 AA-Alcoholics Anonymous 7:00 pm
13 	14	15 Dance Magic 3:30 pm Bible Study 4:00 pm	16 Youth Group 5:00-6:30pm	17 Bridge Club 12:00pm Maundy Thursday Service at 6pm at Trinity UMC	18 Good Friday Service at 6pm at FPC	19 AA-Alcoholics Anonymous 7:00 pm
20 	21	22 Dance Magic 3:30 pm HAPPY EARTH DAY Bible Study 4:00 pm 	23 Youth Group 5:00-6:30pm	24 Bridge Club 12:00pm	25	26 AA-Alcoholics Anonymous 7:00 pm
27 Worship 9:30 am	28	29 Dance Magic 3:30 pm Bible Study 4:00 pm	30 Youth Group 5:00-6:30pm			

As I get older, the more I stay focused on the acceptance of myself and others, and choose compassion over judgment and curiosity over fear.

-Tracee Ellis Ross

We are each made for goodness, love and compassion. Our lives are transformed as much as the world is when we live with these truths.

-Desmond Tutu

You may call God love, you may call God goodness. But the best name for God is compassion.

-Meister Eckhart

Compassion does not just happen. Pity does, but compassion is not pity. It's not a feeling. Compassion is a viewpoint, a way of life, a perspective, a habit that becomes a discipline - and more than anything else, compassion is a choice we make that love is more important than comfort or convenience.

-Glennon Doyle Melton

Our spiritual gifts are not just talents or skills; they are expressions of our soul's Purpose.

– Oprah Winfrey

Don't ask what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive, and go do it.

Because what the world needs is people who have come alive.

— Howard Thurman

Lent services: All are welcome!

I am pleased to be working with my fellow ministers, Rev. Sean Johnson from Trinity United Methodist, and Rev. Jeff Seger from First Christian, to provide Lent services for our congregations and community. All are welcome to join us.

Maundy Thursday, **April 17**

6:00 pm CT, Trinity United Methodist

Good Friday, **April 18**

6:00 pm CT, First Presbyterian

Devotional Booklets for Lent

Don't forget to pick up a copy of our Lenten Devotional in the back of the sanctuary or in the church office. It is called *Life Renewed*, and it is from Augsburg Fortress.

Lenten Lunches

11:45am-12:45pm on the following Wednesdays:

April 2 at St. Luke Evangelical Lutheran Church

April 9 at Trinity United Methodist Church



Get Ready for VBS!

VBS will be June 3rd, 4th, and 5th from 5-7 pm. We would love volunteers for helping with dinner, recreation, crafts, and other activities! Please check out the sign-up sheets at the back of the church beginning this month. More news and information coming soon.

Part of my job as your teaching elder pastor is to study and learn. Here's what I'm reading and reflecting on now and in the near future. – Pastor Michelle

What I've Been Reading

- Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Water Dancer*
- Frans de Waal, *Are We Smart Enough to Know How Smart Animals Are?*
- Jonathan Haidt, *The Righteous Mind*
- Mary Oliver, *Upstream: Selected Essays*
- Luke Powery, *Becoming Human: The Holy Spirit and the Rhetoric of Race*

What I'll Be Reading Next

- Fred Rogers, *The World According to Mister Rogers: Important Things to Remember*
- Bruce Reyes-Chow, *Everything Good About God is True: Choosing Faith*
- Emily Wilson, translator, *The Iliad*
- Robin Kimmerer and John Burgoyne, *Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World*
- Ezra Klein and Derek Thompson, *Abundance*
- Dan McClellan, *The Bible Says So: What We Get Right (and Wrong) about Scripture's Most Controversial Issues*

P.S. I need to read 100 books by the end of this year. Turns out that's a lot! What short books of about 100 pages would you recommend?



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