

What We Live By— *A Disciple's Daily Bread*

*Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters;
and you that have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without price.
Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread,
and your labor for that which does not satisfy?
Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good,
and delight yourselves in rich food.
Incline your ear, and come to me;
listen, so that you may live.*

—ISAIAH 55:1–3A

About a year after I had made a whole-life commitment to follow Jesus, in the spring of 2000, I was presented with an offer I could not refuse but almost did. On two separate occasions, fellow congregation members suggested that I should consider becoming the next leader of Jeremiah House, a Service Adventure unit of Mennonite Mission Network that was supported by our congregation, Kern Road Mennonite Church, in South Bend, Indiana. At first I was hesitant: voluntary service is a fine thing, I thought, but did I want

The Way of Life

to become entangled in the messiness of community life? After the second prompting, however, I knew that the Holy Spirit was at work in the words of my sister and brother. I realized that I needed to pray about this, and following a time of discernment I said “yes”—which proved to be a pivotal “yes” in my life in unexpected ways.

I had never before lived in, much less been the leader of, an intentional Christian community. It was a steep learning curve—a difficult challenge, to say the least, but a grace-filled process, as I would eventually discover. Indeed, it was through this experience that I came to understand personally that the true substance of life, the real stuff of abundant life, is nothing other than grace. Throughout my time as house leader, I relied for counsel on that time-tested guide for Christian community, the Rule of Saint Benedict, whose wisdom nurtured in my heart and mind a sense and vision for Christian life suffused in grace.

The following piece draws from two sources: a worship presentation at Kern Road Mennonite Church, in June 2002, and a public presentation on the occasion of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day, in January 2004, at a workshop to promote a new Youth Justice Project as an alternative to the juvenile justice system.¹

We Live by Grace

“We live by gifts, not by what we earn.” So did Garrison Keillor, renowned storyteller and folk theologian, sum up “the news from Lake Wobegon” one Saturday evening on his radio program, *A Prairie Home Companion*. When I’d realized what he’d said, I sat stunned for a moment at what I’d heard; for it occurred to me that I could not think of a simpler way to summarize the gospel, the good news of God’s grace. It reminds me of the message proclaimed by the prophet, who invites us to feast freely on the riches of God’s goodness, to satisfy our souls with abundant bread from heaven, the bread that gives life. The source and sustenance of our life is not in us, our own efforts or merits or entitlements, but rather in what we undeservedly and unexpectedly receive from and give to others—and, ultimately, God. After

1. For further reflections on Christian community and voluntary service based on my experience in Service Adventure, see my essay, “Service and Sacrifice.”

securing all our individual gains, after counting all our personal successes, we are still needy, if only because we can neither manufacture nor earn for ourselves one essential thing—love. Thus the prophet asks us: Why expend yourself on what does not satisfy your soul, much less give you life?

After proclaiming the good news of the resurrection of Christ and confessing his own inadequacy to be called an apostle, the Apostle Paul declares that, nonetheless, grace is the substance of his being, the means of his existence: “But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me has not been in vain” (1 Cor 15:10). According to Paul, the primary giver and sustainer of life is Christ; and we live in Christ by freely receiving his love in faith, so that we who live by faith in the love of Christ no longer live on the merit of our own effort: “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20). The grace by which I live is not the Reformation theological abstraction whereby guilt inherited through original sin is cancelled in a legal transaction between God the Father and God the Son at the cross, a satisfaction of God that leaves me, this person in the flesh, substantially unchanged. Paul said otherwise—grace is precisely that reality whereby God-in-Christ lives in me in the flesh. Day by day, as I freely receive the love of Christ in faith, I am being personally transformed so that Christ is really present in me and sustains my every breath. Paul speaks of this transformation as a radical renewal of creation: “If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new” (2 Cor 5:17)! Furthermore, Christ did not die so that I might live for myself alone. That I live by faith in the love of Christ—indeed, that the crucified and risen Christ lives in and through me—entails that I must now live for Christ: “For the love of Christ urges us on . . . [Christ] died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them” (2 Cor 5:14–15).

This life of transforming grace is not for me to live in isolation, however—it is not just me and Jesus. For to live by grace one must freely receive, and give, love in faith; and that implies being in relationship with others. We live by faith when we see the face of Christ, the image of God, in each other and, seeing Christ present in each other, either respond with mercy to the need of the other or in humility allow the other to serve one's own need. The need of the other is God's invitation to fellowship, and the gift of the other is God's offer of blessing. It is thus by life together in a community of

The Way of Life

grace—this merciful offering and humble receiving of love—that one lives fully in Christ. Community is *sacrament*, a truly living, visible sign to the world of God’s grace made manifest in the flesh. It is a corporate *we* that concretely embodies Christ in the world.

We Live by Faith

From 2000 to 2004 I lived in community with several young adults as leader of a voluntary service unit. By partaking of the life of this community, I came to taste and see the incarnate grace of which Keillor and Paul speak. There was manna enough for us day by day as together we endeavored by the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit to live simply; share routine responsibilities; be accountable to one another for resources, time, and behavior; worship God together in spirit and in truth; live out our words; bear with one another’s burdens and limitations; affirm each other’s gifts; listen to the message of wisdom spoken by the other; receive guests with generous hospitality; and “seek the *shalom* of the city” (Jer 29:7, our mission statement) by being instruments of peace in service to both neighbors and strangers in need.

Although we lived together in a voluntary *service* unit, I came to realize that service was not primarily what we were about. Instead, I believe, the primary social task of our unit was to be a household of faith. If we did not witness faithfully to the *shalom* of God’s kingdom by our very being-together, then how could we effectively seek the *shalom* of our city for God? After all, as Alan Kreider has observed, when it comes to alternative models of social living, “The church has nothing to offer the world other than what it has learned to live in its own domestic life.”²

What communal discipleship teaches are those spiritual disciplines of personal sacrifice (of privacy, autonomy, self-gratification, and self-sufficiency) that are necessary for cultivating the virtues of character (humility, patience, compassion, gratitude, and generosity), which are themselves necessary for implementing the practices of community (mutual accountability, sharing resources, bearing burdens, and forgiving grievances) by which human lives of Christ-like service are possible and sustainable (cf. Eph 4:17—5:2; Phil 2:1–13; Col 3:1–17). Community teaches us the virtue of moderating individual desire with concern for the common good by using our freedom to serve the well-being of one another: “For you were

2. Kreider et al., *Culture of Peace*, 61.

called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another" (Gal 5:13). Most importantly, community invites us into mutual vulnerability, to need and value one another as equal members of one body (1 Cor 12:12–27).

We were, in a very real sense, a "household of God" being "built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God" (Eph 2:19–22). Over those years I had the awesome privilege of entering the "Holy of Holies" in the most ordinary of circumstances because my community members incarnated God for me, and I for them, in many ways. In our midst, God came near as we . . . danced for joy and sang with praise and thanksgiving; played guitar, piano, and didjeridoo; laughed aloud and cried in silence; listened attentively as we told stories of struggle and success, prayed about hopes and fears, and mused on future plans; showed us a wounded heart and welcomed our embrace; prepared food in our kitchen and shared tea at our table of plenty.

Now, for sure, we were far from perfect. In actuality, we sometimes failed to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (Eph 4:3). And in the daily rub of things our garments of "compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience" (Col 3:12) often wore thin. That is why the "ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:18) is an essential practice in the discipleship community. This means that the cross—by which former enemies make peace with one another, and, having been made friends in Christ, together enjoy peace with God (Rom 5:6ff; Eph 2:11ff.)—is the necessary center of life together in Christ. Christian community, then, is a pilgrimage of peacemaking, an ongoing process of patching holes and mending tears where the garment of love has worn too thin (Col 3:14).

This life of grace is hard work requiring intentionality, for the yoke of community does not come naturally to us. What community is about is radically countercultural; and each of us has, more or less, passively imbibed from the secular milieu an individualistic ethos that idolizes the autonomous, sufficient self and portrays accountability and interdependence as weakness and deficiency. Each of us is thus in need of daily conversion to community. Community calls us to contract the self to make room for the other and reminds us that before the other we stand on holy ground. Especially in the presence of the other's weakness—which cries out to us, "Help me, have mercy"—we are called to put off our shoes of pride and power and approach with "the fear of the Lord" instead of wielding our

The Way of Life

rights in self-vindication. Acutely aware of our own moral frailty and the fragility of our life together, we must offer and receive forgiveness, time and time again.

Grace is precisely that by which it is possible for competing and conflicting individuals to live together as a “we” in a communion of peace: we live by grace—or the “we” dies.

We Live by Peace

As a Christian household community, we lived by a covenant that both set boundaries on acceptable behavior as well as committed us to dealing with transgression of community boundaries in a way that seeks to heal rather than hurt, a way that seeks to correct wrongdoers rather than inflicting painful penalties to punish wrongdoing, a way that seeks to right relationships that have been ruptured and restore the brother or sister who has strayed from the path of right rather than to subject him or her to judgment and rejection. In this we aimed to follow the scriptural instruction of the Apostle Paul:

My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ. (Gal 6:1–2)

In one situation during my four years as Servant Adventure leader, I found myself needing to deal with some serious wrongdoing—a member of our household had transgressed nearly every major community boundary, transgressions that were clearly grounds for dismissal from our community, including: habitual lying/deception; drug, alcohol, and tobacco use; failing other house members; and being late to work. His transgressions also involved his roommate in concealing his wrongdoing. This was serious stuff that I, as house leader, could not take lightly—the trust and fidelity that are fundamental to community life had been violated and the basic integrity of our household was at stake. For sure, he had to be held accountable and could not be permitted to continue in his wrongdoing. At the same time, simply dismissing him from the community would have resolved nothing: the wrongs he had done would not have been set right, relationships that had been broken would not have been healed, and rather than restoring

our community we would instead have been dismembered. The way to deal with such wrongdoing according to retributive justice would have been to throw the book at him—to deal out the painful consequences of his behavior, to impose on him the penalty he had coming, to give him just deserts. But then there would have been no forgiveness, no reconciliation, no healing of hurt, no freedom of release for either him or our household from the wrong that had been done—no grace, no atonement, no peace.

Once his transgressions were uncovered, I resolved that we would deal with him as the scripture instructs—restore him with gentleness. We dealt with his wrongdoing through a disciplinary process: (a) He had to confess fully his transgressions in front of the entire household and face everyone's reaction, hear other house members express the hurt and anger of damaged trust. (b) He had to hear me as house leader pronounce judgment that by his transgression he had broken faith with us; it was now up to him whether he would choose to remain part of our community by taking steps to make things right and so make good our claim of him as a brother. (c) He had to promise to walk the right way from then on and agree to measures of accountability that restricted his freedom away from the house and permitted us to hold him to his promises—if he failed at this, he would be asked to leave our community.

This disciplinary process proved far more successful than I had anticipated: he never again offended during the rest of his year with us; but even more importantly, he learned that our trust was important to him *and* that he mattered to us. Now, all was not thereby perfect—restorative discipline is no magic wand that makes it as if the wrongdoing and the hurt didn't happen. It was hard for some house members to fully trust him again, and a residue of resentment against him did remain. So, although there was reconciliation in that he was restored to membership as one of us, there was still resistance by some to full relationship, a resistance he was aware of even though it was unspoken. This, though, taught him a further lesson—having to go on living with those whom he had offended but who had received him back into fellowship taught him that trust is fragile and that breaking trust creates deep hurt and lasting effects. Had we dismissed him from the community as punishment for his wrongdoing, he would never have had to face the real consequences of his actions and take responsibility for the harm he had caused.³

3. This episode is an example of what is called "restorative justice." For an excellent exposition of the biblical theology of restorative justice, see Marshall, *Beyond Retribution*,

We Live by Thanks

Reflecting on my role as community leader (especially my own failures to be gracious), I have drawn three practical lessons:

- As others change, be open to change in yourself. Let others surprise you, and let yourself surprise you. For the Spirit moves beyond your categories, labels, and judgments.
- Rules are necessary for accountability, but relationships are more important than rules. The rules we make are always arbitrary to some degree, but we cannot live without relationships. While a rule should not be broken simply to avoid bending a relationship (sometimes we do need to repent, to “turn around”), bend a rule before breaking a relationship. When a wrong requires righting to save the integrity of the community, justice should be redemptive, **not** punitive, allowing possibility for repentance, reconciliation, and renewal.
- Receive each person as a gift from God, and treat each one as you would God’s most precious gift, Jesus Christ. When (not if!) you fall short of that, confess your sin to God and each other. Be forgiven. And forgive. For it is grace that sustains the relationships necessary for life and which gives freedom to change.

I don’t pretend that I practiced servant leadership perfectly in the Service Adventure unit. Indeed, I still have much to learn, and my housemates were some of my best teachers. That was a principal motivation for deciding to extend my initial two-year term of service for a second term as leader of Jeremiah House. At one point I had thought that if the second year of my first term were a good year I would take it and exit, feeling satisfied for having fulfilled my commitment. I had even started looking forward to a future in a land flowing with milk and honey. As I remembered how much God had provided for me thus far, however, I realized that I was forgetting how much I needed the manna of my community. Cognizant of my own ingratitude, I mused: had Israel been satisfied with and thankful for manna from heaven, they could have lived and worshipped God in the desert forever. The promised land is where God feeds us today and we give thanks for our daily bread.

Upon announcing over dinner my decision to serve another term, one of my housemates asked the very question that had concerned me, “Aren’t

as well as my own book, *Atonement, Justice, and Peace*.

you worried that next year might be worse?" My reply was straightforward: While it is a law of nature that things could always be worse, in the most important respect next year will be the same as this year and the year before—a gift from God.

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