

GRACE AND GRATITUDE
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18th Sunday in Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Over the pasts two weeks I watched the Republican and Democratic National Conventions, which prompts the question: *How would Jesus vote?*

Well, I happen to know but I ain't sayin'! Actually, I don't know. But I do suspect his answer would be evasive and take us to an entirely different place and an entirely different question, as you are about to see in the gospel lesson for today.

Luke 12:13-21

Someone in the crowd once said to Jesus, "Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me."

Or as some might say in today's political environment: "Jesus, tell the 1% to give up some of their loot to the rest of us."

But Jesus said to him, "Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you? You must take care and be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

Or, as Jesus once said: *Humans can't live on bread alone.*

Of course, bread is necessary but it's not sufficient. Economic solutions are great, too, but not sufficient. Humans need something else to satisfy their hungry hearts. For without love, compassion, mercy, forgiveness, justice, peace, freedom and companions, *things are not enough.*

Which is to say: It's possible to be a billionaire, to possess great wealth and fame and speak with a tongue of fire, and still lose your soul. It's possible to be a great nation, with a great economy and the strongest military force in the world and still lose the soul of the nation. For without community, acceptance, friends, allies and love—*wealth, fame and even national security are not enough.*

Then Jesus told them a parable: Once upon a time the land of a rich man produced abundantly. "What should I do," he asked himself, "for I have no place to store all these crops? I know," he said. "I will pull down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store all my grain and all my goods. And I will say to my soul, 'Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.'"

And that night, God said, "You fool! This very night your life is demanded of you. And all the things you have hoarded, whose then will they be?"

"And so it is," said Jesus, "with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God."

Which is to say: You can gain the whole world and lose your soul. And what good is that?

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Forty years ago this month, I was installed as the 18th pastor to serve this historic church. Over these 40 years I have received grace in abundance. My barns are full. My heart is full of gratitude.

Forty years ago I had no long-range plan. I just kept showing up Sunday after Sunday, year after year. At that time the pattern for ministers was to serve a church seven years

or so and then move on to a larger, more prestigious, “higher steeple” church that paid more money.

After seven years I felt that itch. And again seven years later. But it didn’t take me long to realize each time that there was no better place for me than here. *You can have your high steeples and higher salaries! I’ll take this anytime.* Of course, it didn’t help my “move-on itch” when my wife Paula said: “Go ahead. I like it here!”

Forty years ago, I had no idea I’d be here 40 years later basking in the wonder of a vibrant, robust and deeply compassionate congregation. I know the old, old story of Israel wondering 40 years in the wilderness. But I also know that just because we journey in a wilderness for 40 years munching on manna doesn’t guarantee a “Promise Land” at the end. But here I am, 40 years later gazing in awe Sunday after Sunday at a community of faith flowing with milk and honey.

As it turns out the Promise Land isn’t somewhere else. The promise is always here. As Eckhart Tolle put in his book, *The Power of Now*, “Gratitude for the present moment and the fullness of life now is the true prosperity.”

The promise of love and healing is always at hand, but sometimes it takes a while for it to be revealed. As that Easter hymn puts it: In the bulb there is a flower, in the cocoon a butterfly, each waiting to be revealed.

Every morning we awaken in the wondrous web life. It’s not of our own making; it’s sheer grace. Every breath we take is not of our making; it is a gift. Sheer grace. We are loved by an unending love, by family and friends that pick us up time and time again and say: *You are precious. Not perfect, no one is. But you are precious in my eyes.* Sheer grace.

Without love, we are nothing.

And every time we assemble here with our household of faith, it is a gift. Sheer grace. Community like this is a gift.

What, we might ask, did we do to deserve any of this? The plain answer is: *Nothing. I did nothing to deserve this.* But, you know what, we say, I’ll take it anyway and somehow live into gratitude for the wonder and grace of it all.

We did nothing to deserve this grace. It’s why we call it grace—undeserved favor. It’s not meant to make us feel small or helpless. It’s meant to make us feel grateful and to live faithfully and responsibly returning the grace of love to all.

I may have had a hand in what has arisen here over 40 years. But mine was hardly the only one. It takes a village. It takes a congregation. No one can do such a thing alone.

Together we have worked to cultivate a community of faith and prayer. Together we have worked to create a school of love in which we are all learning from Jesus, the light and love of the world, how to be in true communion with the One and true community with all.

We have fed the hungry. We have sheltered the homeless. We have stood up for Muslims and the LGBTQ community. We have stood against gun violence. We have comforted those wounded in more ways than one. We have worked to let the light of love, peace and justice shine.

This is no time to hide that light or to grow content and complacent. It’s no time to put away the plow, lock the barn door and lean back in merriment and ease. To gloat or quit is to lose our very souls.

So in this my 40th year, I invite you to embrace with me our friend Pastor Steve’s resolution which I found in my email this week.

*We will stand up to cynicism, hate and indifference,
and blanket this world with compassion, calm and mercy.
We will proclaim the truth against all resistance.
We will meet fear and hate with healing.
We will obstruct the progress of injustice
with our prayers, our words and our bodies.
And we will infest the world with grace and love.
(Steve Garnaas-Holmes)*

Which is to say, we will live into gratitude and hope as long as we have breath.