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Romans 12:6-8

"We have different gifts, according to the grace given to each of us. . . . if it is to encourage, then give encouragement." (NIV)

1 Timothy 6:18

"Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share." (NIV)

I had been a Christian since I was a teenager. When I graduated from high school, I left the farm to go to Duluth for nurse's training. When I became a part of the Jesus People Movement, I received the baptism of the Holy Spirit and Christianity became NEW; Jesus became REAL! Through the examples of many spirit-filled Christians like Rev. Sylvester and Sharon Witherspoon, "Mama " Bertha Battes, and Rev. John Wilms, I saw generosity and hospitality as I'd never known. Love in action.

Now, in my seventh decade, my husband , Jeff and I have tried to reach out as well, bringing many people to stay in our home, creating many meals of fellowship, and baking abundantly. We write letters, emails, and texts to many, to let them know they are loved by us and Jesus. This hospitality has given us much joy! This same attitude abounds in Peace Church. This is truly a place where "All are welcome."

Prayer

Heavenly Father, we are trusting in your mercy, your counsel, and your strength. We pray that our kindness and hospitality blesses you and makes you smile. That it gives you joy as it fills us with joy. Thank you that you are with us from our infancy to this present day and always will be. In Jesus' precious name, amen.

—Marilyn Fifield

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2 Corinthians 4: 1, 7-10

"Therefore, since it is by God's mercy that we are engaged in this ministry, we do not lose heart. . . . But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way but not crushed, perplexed but not driven to despair, persecuted but not forsaken, struck down but not destroyed, always carrying around in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be made visible in our bodies." (NRSV)

Rev. Norm Behrman belonged to a denomination that did not ordain women. I met him when I served as a youth intern for his congregation during a college gap year. In my initial interview, I told him I was willing to do educational and social justice work, but I would not teach confirmation class—I was not at all sure I even believed in God! In spite of that declaration on my part, Norm took me on as an intern and helped me explore congregational ministry and my own faith journey. At the end of the year, when I left, his parting words to me were these: "I don't know how, but the church needs to find a place for you."

Five years later, he chose the above verse from 2 Corinthians 4 as the text for my ordination service. He preached that night about life in ministry—it's not about any of us as individuals, nor is it about the church as an institution—it is about seeing the extraordinary power of God that carries us through whatever life brings our way. God's transforming power comes to us through very ordinary, vulnerable human beings. That is the message of Jesus' incarnation. It is at the center of one's call to ministry. It is the essence of Spirit in congregations seeking to be beloved community. It applies to all of us, not just those whom the church ordains for leadership.

Norm gave me a touchstone to which I often return when life seems difficult, overwhelming, or just too hard. I think I love most the affirmation that we may be perplexed but not driven to despair. After all, we are earthen vessels through which God's extraordinary power can transform lives and communities. This text prepared me for the life I've lived, and Peace Church is a community in which I see God's extraordinary power at work among ordinary human beings.

Prayer

Sustaining Spirit, remind me again that I am called into service so that You can transform lives in this community and so that this community can be an instrument of your work in the world. Amen.

—Rev. Charlotte Frantz

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1 Peter 5:7-11

"Cast all your anxiety on him, because he cares for you. Discipline yourselves; keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith, for you know that your brothers and sisters in all the world are undergoing the same kinds of suffering. And after you have suffered for a little while, the God of all grace, who has called you to his eternal glory in Christ, will himself restore, support, strengthen, and establish you. To him be the power forever and ever. Amen." (NRSV)

Twenty-five years ago I was living in Seattle with Tom. I was learning my trades, naturopathic medicine and midwifery, and exploring faith. We somehow found a Sunday night service at St. Paul's Episcopal Church where a group of men did a chanting, singing, meditative worship called "Compline" every week in this church packed with people, including plenty of young adults who sat on the floor watching, listening.

Every Sunday, one in the choir would call out: "Be Sober, Be Vigilant! Your adversary the devil prowls like a roaring lion, seeking those whom he may devour...!"

What a wild thing to hear at church! Startling. Provocative. We don't much hear this word "devil" spoken out loud in the UCC. But I am pretty sure we all believe there is evil out there, and plenty of it on the prowl. Suffering is real. It is in front of us. It is all around us. This passage from Peter reminds us that God is present through all the yuck. Peter directs us to hold tight to faith in God, no matter what. Because God cares for us, God gives us strength.

Prayer

In this church we come together to find solace from the storm. May our worship at Peace continue to remind us to stay firm in our faith, and that God really does give us the help we need. May we trust in God's power.

—Monica Liddle

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Genesis 12:1-2

"Now the Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.'" (ESV)

The part of this scripture that jumps out to me is the final phrase: so that YOU will be a blessing. This makes me immediately think of my mother. She is a blessing to so many people in this world. She is the eldest of 6 kids and helped support her younger siblings as her parents fell into depression and alcoholism. She worked hard in school, graduated college, started working in a successful career, married, and had my brother, sister, and me.

Even though her parents didn't set a great example of how to raise a family with unconditional love, curiosity, humor, and generosity, she managed to forge a new path. She (and my dad) raised us with honesty, love, respect, and the occasional, "SHISTASOMA!" (the closest she got to a really big swear). Since leaving the family nest, I have realized that I can no longer just sign my name on my parents' cards as my contribution. When new neighbors move into my neighborhood, I need to be the one to walk over with a batch of fresh baked goods and a welcome card.

When my church needs an HVAC overhaul, it's my job to contribute however I am able. My mother is absolutely a blessing in this world, and she has done a terrific job of preparing the way for me to be a blessing as well. It's my turn. My kids are still young. I hope that I can live a life of blessing others so that in 20 some years, they will look back and see me in the same light as I do my mother.

Prayer

Dear God, help us to find ways that we can all be blessings in our community. Show us how to give generously of ourselves, our time, our gifts, and our resources. Give us courage to forge new paths of radical kindness and hospitality. We are thankful for those in our lives who inspire us to be the most generous versions of ourselves. Thank you for walking alongside us. Amen.

—Laura Hamel

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Proverbs 21:3

"To do what is right and just is more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice." (NIV)

Our family is fairly new to Duluth. We came from a big city and had spent years struggling to find a church we felt comfortable in, so we weren't exactly looking forward to the process here either. But early on we were invited to Peace by some good friends and immediately felt like this was a place we could call our spiritual home.

In Proverbs 21:3, we're reminded that doing the right thing is more important than any superficial religious display. Faith is about the way we live and care for one another. At Peace, that characteristic is evident in so many ways. Beyond even the observable things, our family could *feel* it in the air as soon as we walked into the building. Peace is a special, spirit-filled place, and sustaining that community requires investment in its physical home, too.

In the coming days, may we ask ourselves, "How can I contribute in a way that helps Peace continue to be a place where we live out our faith and care for one another?"

Prayer

Lord, we thank you for the various ways that all of us have found Peace. Guide us in this season as we collectively consider how our gifts can be used to further the mission of Peace: to live the way of Jesus and build a beloved community here in northern Minnesota.

—Anderbergs

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Matthew 6:21

"For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (NIV)

When I was young, one of my favorite things to do was visit my grandparents in Redwood Falls, MN. From the moment I got off the Greyhound bus after riding all the way from Duluth, I felt special. Grandma had a drawer in the kitchen filled with treats that I could take from anytime I wanted; Red Hots, Oreos, Nutter Butters and Nips were on my personal menu every day I was there. In the evenings Grandma and Grandpa would have Happy Hour with snacks and a cocktail and they always fixed me my own "Kiddie Cocktail." We played cribbage and Skipbo and I was relaxed and happy just hanging out with them.

My grandparents were both devout Christians, but they never worshiped together. Grandpa was Lutheran and Grandma was Catholic, and they married at a time when that difference alone was enough to not have family support. Hence, they eloped to Iowa. Every Sunday afterwards for their 62 years of marriage, they went to their separate church services. Afterwards over brunch, they talked about the services that day. This seemed to bring them closer together and strengthen their own faiths.

Last week I spent some time with my cousin who was visiting Duluth. He and I reminisced a lot about our grandparents. It's funny how we, and every other cousin, has the exact same memories of visits with Grandma and Grandpa, and yet they made each of us feel special, like we were a special gift. We are blessed that Percy and Marcella were our role models. They showed us the importance of love, generosity, relationships, and faith. They prepared the way for us. Let us do the same for others.

Prayer

Creator God, thank you for the people in our lives who have prepared the way for us. Help us to emulate what we have learned as we prepare the way for the next generations. Amen.

—Annette Strom

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Matthew 11:28-30

"Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light." (ESV)

Growing up, before the sanctuary was rearranged, I usually entered our sacred space through the heavy, solid wood doors along the western wall. Etched upon them: "Come Unto Me, I Will Give You Rest." As I reached for the Bible that Peace United Church of Christ gave me as a child for this devotion, I noticed the date written in clear handwriting on the inside cover: 1991. For thirty-five years, this gift from Peace Church has been guiding and challenging my faith journey. Over the decades, I've walked into our sanctuary and experienced jubilation and grief, weddings and funerals, baptisms and confirmations, candlelight vigils, music that has brought me to tears, and words of wisdom that have altered my life.

While our church family has found rest, safety, and community in our pews, we have not been idly resting. Peace Church deeply leans into our Mission Statement of "...building the beloved community." We are a Just Peace Church, a Sanctuary Congregation, and Open and Affirming, and we recently opened a wing where the youth shelter Another Door cares for some of the most vulnerable among us. Yet God's rest isn't idleness, nor is it busyness to appease the Lord. Our congregation trusts God, leaning into the everlasting arms. God restores, and God provides; when we become comfortable knowing this, divine rest becomes possible.

In my contemplations for this devotion, I have come to realize that my participation in Peace Church is the most consistent thing I have done in my life. From adolescence into adulthood, blessed grace and rest have been a constant theme within the holy spaces of our incredible church. The gift from Peace Church extends well beyond the worn binding of my Bible. The truest blessing from my faith community has been the kindness, the steadfastness, and the holy inspiration I receive from each interaction with you. I am eternally grateful and devoted to this Peace Church family.

Prayer

Divine Creator, I place my burdens and troubles before you, knowing you can handle all things. Instill faith within me to rest when I am weary, give me strength when I falter, and keep me ever-present to the wonders of your love. Amen.

—Bud Trnka