

## *SIGNS OF LIFE*

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### GRACE

You will know if you've been part of this community for a while that Vision has served us well. We've had Vision Statements that have spurred us on and given us a focus. Vision is about where we think we want to be as a community of God's people. It's what we're aiming at, it's the direction we're heading. Our current Vision Statement says that by 2015 we will naturally be radical followers of Christ, caught up in him, enjoying each other, transforming communities and then some....

We are now looking forward to what God might be calling us to do and to be for the next part of the journey, and while our Vision, the way forward, may change, our values, what makes us who we are, does not! Where we want to be comes from who we are. So as we pray and fast for the future, we will remind ourselves of our values – who we are.

We are a GOSPEL People:

Grace,  
One another,  
Servant Hearts,  
People Matter,  
Equipped,  
Lifestyle.

We are a people of Grace! “We will be motivated by God’s free gift of love in all that we do.” So... how are we doing? How are you doing?

How much are you loved? “For God so loved the world that He gave his only son...” How much are you loved? More than you will ever know!

Aren't you glad this verse does not say: “For God so loved the rich, the clever, the healthy, the ones who have it altogether, the socially mobile and the socially acceptable, those who have a job, the old, the young.” Aren't you glad

it says: "For God so loved the world!" because that includes you ... and you... and you and me!

How much are you loved? More than you will ever know or imagine. He loves you because he loves you because he loves you..... When we know we are loved, then we are free to love. "We will be motivated by God's free gift of love in all that we do." How much are you free to love?

I have two shocking stories for you this morning, both are true. Both demonstrate grace:

Story number one.

*Will Campbell grew up in Mississippi eventually going on to study at Yale Divinity School. He returned home to preach and became a director of Religious Life at the University of Mississippi. It was the early 1960's. When it was evident he favoured integration, his tenure as director was ended. He found himself at the forefront of the struggle of the Civil Rights Movement. On one march he met a young man named Jonathan Daniels, a northerner who had also joined the Civil Rights Movement. Campbell faced much opposition in those days from Christians who refused to let other races into their churches.*

*One day the challenge came from a renegade newspaper editor who viewed Christians as the enemy. "In ten words or less, what's the Christian message?" P.D. East asked Campbell. Campbell replied: "We're all bastards but God loves us anyway!" P.D. East's only response was to say: "I gave you ten words – if you want to try again you have two words left!"*

*The definition Campbell gave stung P.D. East, who was, unbeknown to Campbell an illegitimate child. He'd grown up being called a bastard. The more Campbell thought about his definition, the more he liked it!*

*P.D. East however put the definition to the test on the darkest day in Campbell's life. Jonathan Daniels had been arrested for picketing 'white only' stores. On his release from jail, he approached a grocery store where he was ruthlessly gunned down by an Alabama deputy sheriff. Thomas Coleman emptied his shotgun into Daniels stomach killing him and critically injuring a black teenager standing nearby.*

*Jonathan Daniels was 26 years old. P.D. East challenged Campbell: "Let's see if your definition of faith can stand this test!" The first question he asked to a struggling Campbell: "Was Jonathan a bastard?" Campbell replied that though he was one of the most gentle guys he'd known, it's true that everyone is a sinner – so in those terms, yes, he was a bastard. Next question: "Was Thomas Coleman a bastard?" That was much easier for Campbell: "You bet the murderer was a bastard!" Then a third question: "Ok, so which one those bastards does God love the most?"*

*The question hit home to Campbell like an arrow to the heart. In his own words he said: "I agree that the notion that a man could go to a store where a group of unarmed human beings are drinking soda pop and eating moon pies, fire a shot-gun blast at one of them, tearing his lungs and heart and bowels from his body, turn on another and send lead pellets ripping through his flesh and bones and that God should set them free is almost more than I could stand. But unless that is precisely the case then there is no Gospel, there is no Good News. Unless that is the truth we have only bad news, we are back to law alone."<sup>1</sup>*

What Will Campbell learned that night was that the free offer of grace extends not just to the undeserving but to those who, in fact, deserve the opposite! We will be motivated by God's free gift of love in all that we do. How are you doing? The God of grace loves people no one else would.

Story number two:

*It was probably one of the most dreaded diseases of its time. No one understood how to cure it. Everyone feared it and the consequences it would reap for whoever was unfortunate enough to have it. He was a real family man who worked hard to put food on the table. One year during harvest his grip on his scythe seemed weaker. He'd always been strong, but his stomach had the feeling something was not right.*

*The tips of his fingers began to feel numb, then the fingers themselves, until his grip on his scythe was weak. Until, frighteningly, he could hardly feel the tool in his hand. By the end of the season, he could feel nothing at all. He had that*

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<sup>1</sup> Original story told in Philip Yancey's "What's So Amazing About Grace"

*strange sensation that the hand holding the handle of the scythe might as well have belonged to someone else.*

*He said nothing to his wife, of course, he did not want to worry or alarm her. He was worried that she'd already noticed since he tried not to use his hand if he could, but she said nothing. The day came when he, they, had to face the truth. Plunging his hand into a basin of water, the water reddened, a finger was bleeding freely. Aware he had felt nothing he realised he must, somehow have cut his finger on his knife, or a piece of metal, or.... His wife's voice startled him: "It's on your clothes too!"*

*Standing behind him, he turned to see the worried look on her face. He followed her gaze to look at his robe. Spots of blood turned his white robe crimson. For the longest time they looked into each others eyes. Finally she asked: "Shall I go with you to the priest?" "No," he replied, "I'll go alone."*

*As he stood there, his mind in a whirr, his three year old daughter came into the room. He bent down and stroked her cheek with his good hand fully aware it might be the last time he would ever touch her face. His wife touched him on the shoulder hardly able to hold back the tears.*

*The priest only did what he had to. He didn't actually say the words, but he told the man he was, from this moment on, an outcast. With that one statement, whatever the words, the man lost his family, his farm, his friends, his future. His wife met him at the city gates with a bag of clothes. She gave him some bread and coins, neither of which would last very long, but it was all she had.*

*Friends gathered to show their pity, fearful pity. They, like everyone at that moment, were more concerned about his skin than his heart. And from that moment on that's how it was – people were more concerned with what they could see than with his heart.*

*He repulsed those who looked at him, saw their fear in harsh and unkind words and sometimes in the throwing of stones. His hands gnarled, parts of fingers missing, parts of ears and nose too! Children would hide their faces; fathers grab their children; mothers turn away if they happened to see him. Rags could not hide the sores, nor the wrap on his face the rage in his eyes. He did nothing to deserve this. Some people thought he must have sinned, others his parents.*

*It didn't matter to him – he was the outcast – the one on the outside. The bell around his neck was just a constant reminder of what he already knew and others were quick to remind him of.*

*Desperate to see if he could catch a glimpse of his daughter, he walked down the road to his village. He had no intention of entering – he knew the rules. All he wanted was to catch a glimpse of her playing, maybe see his wife, perhaps his fields. He didn't – but he did see the children run away to hide, pointing and laughing. He just wanted to be father again, a husband, a farmer, a man!*

A leper was, of course, the ultimate symbol of the outcast, infected by a condition they did not seek, rejected by those they knew, avoided by people they didn't know, condemned to a future impossible to bear. Forced to face the truth that life would never be the same and banished to a place they would never forget.

How many, I wonder, have been to that place? How many made outcasts because they have contracted leprosy? But how many more I wonder who never contracted leprosy or anything like it?

The child whose ears are too big  
The boy labelled among friends because dad is an alcoholic  
The girl with the misshapen face  
Those who've suffered the trauma of a divorce  
Those with a different sexual orientation  
The terminally ill  
Those who don't share our theology

We build walls to keep them out, or not allow them in, so we don't notice them. How many are there who perceive they don't "fit" so exile themselves? Maybe there are some here today – maybe you!

There are those who try really hard to fit in, but it is, in truth, a painful memory; there are those who live quiet, lonely lives infected by the fear of rejection.

*It was the bleakness of the man's future that made him do it. It was a risky move, but what did he have to love. Either he would look foolish, or he'll be*

*healed! In truth, he wasn't so much moved by any kind of faith as by his desperate anger.*

*Anyway he figured that if God had brought this calamity on him, then God could fix it – or end it. So he went to find the Judean as he had heard him called. He went angry, but that soon changed when he saw Jesus. Somehow he knew instantly he saw him, that Jesus hated the disease as much as he did himself. Somehow he knew even before Jesus spoke that he cared and in those moments his rage became trust and his anger, hope. Hiding behind a rock, he waited until Jesus was almost next to him. He jumped out: "Master!" Jesus stopped, turned and looked along the crowd following him. A murmur of fear spread through the crowd; arms flew in front of faces; children hid. "Unclean!" someone shouted. Everyone stepped back – apart from Jesus who stepped toward the leper.*

*"Lord, if you want to, you can heal me!" If he'd done it with a word, the man would have been thrilled. If he had done it with a prayer he would have rejoiced! But, he reached out and touched him. No one had touched him in years because he was a leper! "I will," he said, "Be healed!"*

Mathew records it this way.

When Jesus came down from the mountainside, large crowds followed him. A man with leprosy came and knelt before him and said, "Lord, if you are willing, you can make me clean." Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man. "I am willing," he said. "Be clean!" Immediately he was cleansed of his leprosy. Then Jesus said to him, "See that you don't tell anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the gift Moses commanded, as a testimony to them." (Mathew 8 v 1-4)

What an understatement!

Jesus touched him when no one else would.  
Jesus valued him when no one else would  
Jesus saw his potential when no one else would  
Jesus breathed hope when no one else would  
Jesus showed love when no one else would.

Jesus recognised that although this leper was unworthy of the touch of a man, he was worthy of the touch of God! The man's disease was banished by Jesus words. His loneliness was treated by a touch of Jesus hands.<sup>2</sup>

Grace steps forward when everyone else steps away; grace reaches out when everyone else withholds. What does grace offer? Grace holds someone's hand through their darkness; grace prays asking God to bless; grace sends a card, writes a letter, types an email, tweets a tweet, makes a call. Grace is motivated by God's free gift of love to us... and to others. Grace does what Jesus did. Grace is knowing you are loved and giving that love away.

We're all bastards but God loves us anyway. How are we doing? How are you doing?

Preached at Crawley Baptist Church on Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> October 2014 by Rev. Ian Phillips.

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<sup>2</sup> Based on the story told in Max Lucado's *"Just Like Jesus"*