

**Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church**  
**The 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday in Lent**  
**February 28, 2021**  
**Mark 8:31-38**  
**by Rev. Sue Trigger**

<sup>31</sup> Then Jesus began to teach his disciples: “The Human One must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and the legal experts, and be killed, and then, after three days, rise from the dead.” <sup>32</sup> He said this plainly. But Peter took hold of Jesus and, scolding him, began to correct him. <sup>33</sup> Jesus turned and looked at his disciples, then sternly corrected Peter: “Get behind me, Satan. You are not thinking God’s thoughts but human thoughts.”

<sup>34</sup> After calling the crowd together with his disciples, Jesus said to them, “All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross, and follow me. <sup>35</sup> All who want to save their lives will lose them. But all who lose their lives because of me and because of the good news will save them. <sup>36</sup> Why would people gain the whole world but lose their lives? <sup>37</sup> What will people give in exchange for their lives? <sup>38</sup> Whoever is ashamed of me and my words in this unfaithful and sinful generation, the Human One will be ashamed of that person when he comes in the Father’s glory with the holy angels.”

Oh Peter, always with the best intentions, but held captive by his human thoughts. We saw it on Transfiguration Sunday when Peter wanted to build shrines for Jesus, Moses and Elijah. Today Peter doesn’t want to believe that Jesus will be killed and tries to correct Jesus by taking hold of him and persuading him, as if that would change what was going to happen. Peter must have been stunned when Jesus said, “Get behind me, Satan. You are not thinking God’s thoughts, but human thoughts.” It was Peter who was corrected, and what a tough correction it was.

We’ve been living in a sea of human thoughts this last year, haven’t we? It’s been difficult to see God’s presence when we’ve been shrouded in a cloud of sadness and frustration. This week the US grieved the deaths of more than 500,000 Americans from Covid-19. The Coronavirus has challenged us physically and emotionally and turned our lives upside down.

In two weeks, our congregation will mark the 1 year anniversary since we closed the church and went to online worship. The Session wrestled long and hard with the decision. Most of us were

hoping it would just be a few weeks, a few months at most. I will never forget the sinking feeling I felt when one of our elders said, “There’s a very good chance this pandemic will go on for a year or more.” And here we are.

The one year marker has been a bitter pill to swallow and many of us have struggled to keep from sinking into despair. I have heard more exasperated comments than ever. “I’m so over coronavirus.” “I’m really done with this.” I’m sure you’ve heard similar comments too. Megan Lee shared a post on Facebook that perfectly captures how many of us are feeling. “You’re not imagining it. Nobody seems to want to talk right now. Messages are brief and replies are late. Talk of catch ups on Zoom are perpetually put on hold. Group chats are no longer pinging all night long. It’s not you. It’s everyone. We are spent. We have nothing left to say. We are tired of saying, “I miss you” and “I can’t wait for this to end”. So mostly we say nothing, put our heads down and get through each day. You’re not imagining it. This is a state of being like no other we have ever known because we are all going through it together but so very far apart. This is hard. No one is judging.”

Being unable to gather together as a congregation has been hard too. The very community that could give us support and encouragement has been meeting online. Online worship, online meetings, online Vacation Bible School, book groups and dinners. Online Sunday school, online Bible study, online congregational business, and choir rehearsals. It’s been like living a version of Ground hog day written by Dr. Seuss.

Our congregation has been challenged to carry on ministries in new and creative ways. As grim as it may feel, we have a lot to celebrate. We’ve made an impact in our community with our donations and volunteer time. In fact, we may have made an even greater impact than usual because we have given greater donations and we’ve fed more people. We’ve managed to keep some connection to one another through groups, phone calls, emails and cards. We’ve seen that God has not abandoned us just because we haven’t been able to be together.

There is one area in the life of the church that has been particularly impacted this last year, and that is our finances. Giving to the church has been a challenge for a long time, but the loss of in person donations and the impact of members losing jobs and business clientele because of the pandemic have taken their toll. We are standing on the precipice of having to make some very difficult decisions about the future ministries of our congregation. I will confess to you that I have had my Peter moments lately where I have been caught up in human thoughts and unable to see God at work in our situation. So today, I invite you to pause with me and invite God into our thoughts, invite God into our struggle.

We're not alone in our struggle. So many churches have had to face financial challenges because of the pandemic. In a Lenten Devotional written by the United Church of Christ for this time of pandemic, the Rev. Ron Patterson wrote, "It's a challenge to live our faith in a time when so much is uncertain. Days and hours feel like months and weeks. Here's a thought:

Friends in recovery often tell me that you are only as sick as your secrets, and one of the biggest secrets in the life of congregations and individuals is the money we have and the money we give. That's private, I always thought. That's between me and God, and none of your business. Maybe. But then, maybe not. Over the years I have caught a glimpse of the possibility that the essential nature of the Holy One is generosity and that when I give, the promised image of the divine in me finds its fullest expression."

Then Rev. Patterson shared this story, "Many years ago, my spouse and I led a small delegation to Sowento, South Africa to partner with three small congregations in that township; the locus of so much of apartheid's pain and the struggle to end it. I was invited to preach in one of the churches.

The congregation gathered in an incomplete building. There were cement block walls and a concrete floor and folding chairs, but no windows. The tin roof was partially open to the sky. There was no electricity or running water, no hymnals, no pulpit, no brass cross, no candles, no

organ. No stuff! Bu there were people; lots of people; veterans of the struggle for justice, wise elders, the young and the old and children, together to sing and find hope for the journey.

It came time for the offering and a woman took a seat behind the 2' X 4' plywood table that served as their communion table. She had a small logbook and a pile of the church's bills for that week. The people began to sing and dance forward, slapping money on the table. She kept counting and each time there was enough to pay a bill, she put it in the book. The dance and the song went on and on as more and more of the bills disappeared into the book.

At one point, the woman turned around and looked at me. I was seated behind her – a spectator enjoying the song and dance, the guest preacher there to preach and go home. Suddenly it happened. Someone once said that until your wallet has a conversion experience, you haven't been converted. I opened my heart to the song, and I started to dance, and I slapped every single bill I had down on that table of grace.

Since that time, I've lived remembering that the most joyful and holy moment in any worship time is the offering! Many of us are worshipping electronically. We are gathering without all the familiar stuff, but we're together and we are called to find ways to give and be generous. <sup>i</sup>

Rev. Patterson described what it looks like to see through a Godly lens. A lens of love and generosity. As he said in his devotion, "Over the years I have caught a glimpse of the possibility that the essential nature of the Holy One is generosity and that when I give, the promised image of the divine in me finds its fullest expression." That is a Godly thought. I'm not sure I've ever really thought of my giving as an expression of the divine in me. I've thought of it as a response of gratitude for God's generosity, but not as a divine action. Perhaps that is a mistake many of us make. I have often heard church members speak of their giving as an affirmation of the work the church is doing. I have heard the opposite as well, people have told me that they don't give because they want to invest in something that looks viable and well cared for and a church that can't meet its budget isn't viable. I've heard people say that unless they get what they want from the church, whatever that may be, they won't give. Those are understandable perspectives, but

they are also human thoughts. We too easily apply human values to our giving, as if we are a business producing a product for sale, and struggle to see our giving as something divine or holy.

Let's take a moment to imagine some God's thoughts about the church. In I Corinthians 12 the apostle Paul wrote, "...there are many parts, but one body. <sup>21</sup> The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you!" And the head cannot say to the feet, "I don't need you!" <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker (human thought) are indispensable (God thought), <sup>23</sup> and the parts that we think are less honorable (human thought) we treat with special honor (God thought). And the parts that are unpresentable (human thought) are treated with special modesty (God thought), <sup>24</sup> while our presentable parts need no special treatment (definitely a God thought). *But God has put the body together, giving greater honor to the parts that lacked it,* <sup>25</sup> so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other. <sup>26</sup> If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it. <sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

God has put the body of Christ together. God has given us the gifts and talents we need to carry out our mission. God has taken a great risk and placed the responsibility for these gifts and talents in our hands. Paul reminds us that this community is sacred, set apart for a special purpose. The most humbling part of that is that we have a lot of control in this holy community. Where we share our gifts and talents, and how much we share is up to each of us to discern. Nonetheless, God believes in our ability to make good choices that will bear fruit for Christ.

It was this weekend, one year ago, that we had a wonderful visioning day for Grace Covenant. Mitch and I were just a little over a year into our ministry with you. Attendance was great. The energy was high, and we began to lay a pathway for the future that we felt would bear fruit. The highest priority that came out of that discussion was the desire to connect with our neighbors. We began thinking of creative ideas to let our neighbors know that we are there for them. We also heard about how we were building a workshop rotation ministry that would open the Bible to our children in fresh and exciting ways. The Mission Team was making plans for a second Workshop Sunday that would give people of all ages the chance to work together as families,

partnering with the community to lend a hand. We were mobilizing and there was so much excitement. Two weeks after the meeting, before the Visioning Day meeting notes were even compiled, the Session had met multiple times to determine the best course for the congregation during the impending virus. On St. Patrick's Day, March 17, the building was closed and the staff and teams had to redirect their efforts and go to work to retool our ministry. It's been a tough year.

But there is good news! We are beginning to see the light at the end of the tunnel! Many of you have received one or two vaccines. It won't be too long before we can begin to gather together for worship and events. Maybe not like we're used to, but gathering just the same. Now that we can see the end of the pandemic, we can begin to get back on track with visioning for the future. We will be able to resume the work of gathering, equipping and sending disciples out into the world. That's something I can get excited about! The future is looking hopeful.

I am so grateful for the many ways that God has helped us bring hope to those who have felt hopeless during this pandemic. We have made an impact on our community in big and small ways. Now, I hope that you will join Mitch and me as we pick up the work we started last March. It is time to revisit our work. Things have changed in the last year, but we still have the opportunity to connect with our neighbors and lend a hand to those in need. Mission Team is already beginning plans for our next Workshop Sunday. A partnership with Johnson County Community College is beginning to grow. The possibilities for Grace Covenant to bring God's generous spirit into the world are right before us.

There are many ways that you can help support the church. Today I want to focus on two of them.

1. If you have not pledged, we ask you to do so. Even if you can't pledge a lot, knowing that you are contributing to God's work through Grace Covenant is a way to say that you are all in and support this church's mission. Giving to the church is an important way that we enthusiastically say yes to God and share in the commitments of the Grace Covenant family. I

ask you to pray about your giving. I pray that your giving will be a joyful and holy moment in which *you* experience God's divine love and generosity.

2. We need you to pray for our church and her mission. On our gpc website, you will find a Prayer for Renewal Guide along with this morning's bulletin and announcements. At the top of the guide you will find our mission statement. ***Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church celebrates God's grace for everyone. We gather to worship. We equip ourselves to share faith. We send ourselves to serve.*** A church that desires to be renewed needs to be in prayer. I ask you to use this guide daily and set aside a time of prayer for the renewal of our church. Begin by repeating our mission statement. Memorize it and pray that God will reveal to you how you can be a part of it. And as you pray, I encourage you to listen for the Holy Spirit guiding us.

We have been entrusted with a great treasure from God that is Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church. This last year, despite the discouraging moments, we have been a partner of hope for many. We will do those things and more in the days to come, but we need your help to do them. We are moving into a time when we need to look for God's thoughts about where we are going and how we are going to get there. The future may not look like we expect, just like things didn't look the way Peter expected, but with our eyes fixed on God's thoughts and your generous support, Christ will show us the way. Are you all in? I am.

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<sup>i</sup> Patterson, The Rev. Ron, "This is Me: Stories of Lent During a Time of Pandemic", Ed. by Courtney Stange-Tregear, The Pacific Northwest Conference of the United Church of Christ, Seattle, WA. 2020.