

Reshaping Ministry in Light of my Sabbatical Experience

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In a word, my sabbatical was a gift of grace, a gift which keeps on giving!

To a relatively small congregation with a deeply compassionate heart, which gives abundantly for the sake of others, but which is not as well known as larger congregations, it was an amazing surprise to be chosen for a sabbatical grant from the Lilly Foundation for Clergy Renewal. To a pastor who also cares deeply and who has been called upon to support people within the congregation and its community, while also facing sudden, immense needs at home, it was an overwhelming gift of grace to be invited into a sacred time of reflection, exploration, and renewal.

In a time when the church is challenged by a complex cultural identity and when we are tempted to be all things to all people, it was an invitation to trust God's work in our world to lay aside my clerical collar and alb for three months and wade into the waters of God's grace poured out for me, with no strings attached...no dissertation to produce and no lecture to deliver immediately upon my return.

Of course, grace is always God's love poured out without strings attached!

But in the day-to-day living out of our baptismal call to follow Christ, it is easy for clergy and laity to respond as though the health of the church, the world, our families, and ourselves are totally dependent upon us. God has created us for the rich, abundant life of giving and receiving, for the mutual blessing of comfort and consolation. Jesus bids us remember God's priorities that we love the Lord with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and our neighbor as ourselves.

Far too often, having grasped a hint of how much God loves us, we seek to give back to God a tenth of all we have, while trying to make a difference in our world all by

ourselves. We forget that we are fully loved, and that what we need to give back is the totality of our lives. It is only when we rest in God's arms, when we release our desperate hold on life, that we can fully experience the wonder of God moving in our lives.

Family of Grace and I are no exception!

Thus, a time to stop, to rely on the goodness of others, to discover how good it is to receive as well as to give, even though our culture bids us be "self-made men and women", to be granted a time of sabbatical has been more than invigorating. It has called forth our reliance upon God's providing and God's guiding more than ever.

At the time that we received our grant, Family of Grace was sixteen years old. When Phil Rue was called to begin a mission congregation on a sparsely populated hill in Auburn, Washington, outreach within the immediate vicinity was challenged by the reality of life in this town on the Green River. One after another, there were unsolved murders of women in the area; the killer was at large. Pastor Rue wisely decided it was not the time or place to go "door-belling", inviting people to worship, when the public was wary of strangers who might be the "Green River Killer!" From the first, our congregation depended upon the graciousness of others. Larger churches in outlying areas and in town invited Pastor Rue to share the mission on the hill. From a handful of churches, a handful of people gathered to become the start of a new congregation. And from the start, there was a sense of God providing. Likewise, there was a sense of call to give as they had received. In the first ten years of life, Family of Grace grew in numbers, in ministry, and in the construction of a multi-purpose building designed to accommodate worship, fellowship, and service to the community. Members rolled up their sleeves and gave hours, talents, supplies, and money to work with Mission Builders, who were a living reminder that drenched in grace, we are called to both give and to receive God's love.

After ten years of serving with Pastor Rue followed by eighteen months of continued ministry with a series of supply pastors, Family of Grace called me to be their pastor. Grace was the operative word in our commitment to each other. Having served two congregations as associate pastor, this was my first "solo" call. Having known only one full time pastor and a series of male interims, Family of Grace had its first female pastor. Yet the call to serve with them was a unanimous call. They were willing to take a chance on me, and I was willing to risk a new venture with them. We committed ourselves to mutual learning and growing together in a ministry of sharing Jesus' love with others.

Our immediate challenges were delightful and rewarding. People in the community were curious about the new pastor in town and visitors came without much effort on our part. Members were excited to share the joy of being active within a small, dynamic, and growing church. Before a year was out, we were bursting at the seams and had launched Family of Grace's second building phase. Within three more years, we had

doubled our physical space. Our worship opportunities grew in number and in style, our youth program spanned from preschool to college age. Known for musicals at Christmas, our choir expanded our outreach with productions at other times of the year as well. From free will offerings, we made donations to Bread for the World and local food banks.

Not all of our learning and growing was fun; much of our depth came out of sorrow and pain. Until my call to serve with Family of Grace, they had had only two funerals; one for an elderly member and one to comfort a neighboring family mourning the tragic death of their young child. But then after I arrived, with the aging and enlarging of the congregation, came several deaths, surgeries, and serious illnesses.

In increasing numbers people within the church and around us were affected by the fluctuations of economic prosperity and recessions. We increased our Good Samaritan Fund to assist people in crisis. We created a sack lunch program for children whose summer breaks from school meant no meal programs to prevent their hunger. We felt graced to be able to ease their pain and build relationships with some families.

Two deep needs to which our congregation responded were suicides. A father in his mid forties left behind a wife and three young sons; a teenager left behind his parents and a sister. These two precious, struggling people took their lives just nine months apart from each other. Both deaths rocked their families, our family of faith, and our community. In the midst of heart-wrenching pain, we did all that we could to minister to broken hearts and broken lives, praying to be instruments of God's peace and a real "family of grace" for all. Even nearby public schools welcomed announcements of special times at our congregation for any and all surviving suicide, and for youth clamoring for comfort in the midst of grief too dark to understand. Mental health became a special focus of our ministry, that continues to grow even now.

If all these joys and sorrows were not enough to remind me of how much I depend upon God for daily sustenance and how much I need God's grace, the first five years of my call at Family of Grace brought great personal challenges as well. The very weekend the congregation voted to call me, my family received word that one of my cousins had been executed in Chechnya. Fred Cuny was an international disaster and relief specialist, working at that time for the Soros Foundation, seeking medical help and food for civilians in their ravaged country. He longed to be an instrument for peace. For over twenty years he had worked around the globe, aiding refugee camps in natural disasters, assisting in rebuilding homes, and being alert to ways for people to unearth not only their towns, but their economies. He knew the significance of working together, people of all races and creeds, in order to experience the global community that is our gift from God. The loss of our cousin profoundly impacted my entire family. Family of Grace joined our prayers of blessing upon his work and thanksgiving for the inspiration he was.

Our personal struggles had just begun! Within the first three years of my call, one of our sons had his first of two mental health crises, and our other son was suddenly paralyzed and needed life-saving surgery and months of in-patient rehabilitation. Both sons worked long and hard to regain their lives; both graduated from college. And both continue to live with permanent disabilities. My father incurred a brain injury that forever changed his life, leaving him disabled and dependent upon us for assistance in many ways. Likewise, my mother, in her eighties, became ever more frail and in need of support. I, too, had a critical medical need that required major surgery, and my husband suddenly lost part of his vision. It seemed that just when life couldn't be more difficult, something else happened at work or at home that brought us to our knees, begging for strength, for hope, for courage, for understanding.

That I was able to continue in ministry at all was purely a gift of grace. As a Lutheran Christian, the centrality of the theology of the cross was, and is, a sustaining communication of Jesus' love, from His weakest moments *for* our weakest moments. In such a fellowship with God, there is a soul-stretching gift of strength. In the midst of my cries, "How long, Oh Lord?" and "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" I remembered Christ, who for our sake knew and endured such pain. God with us, God enfleshed. He could have remained unsullied, could have stayed within Heaven's glories. Rather, Jesus came to touch the outcast, the sinner, the lost, the lonely, the ill, and the dying with love. Just so, Jesus' love covered our pain, our fear, our grief. If I understood nothing more than that Jesus knew our pain and the pain of those with whom I served, it was enough. We experienced the reality that when we have Jesus, we have all we truly need.

Into the mix of joy and sorrow, of clarity and confusion, of faith and doubt, came the incredible gift of the Lilly grant! It was grace, an undeserved gift, a blessing to nurture Family of Grace, my family, and me.

Because the grant paid for a supply pastor to preach and teach on Sundays and provide pastoral care during the week, and it increased our part-time secretary's hours to nearly full time, the congregation received support and care during my three month absence. For some members this was not a difficult transition; they'd been through transitions in the church's earlier years. But for others it was a real growth in faith. I was the only pastor some had known; they were new to Christ and new to the church. Some had lived through very difficult personal times with the support of Family of Grace and my ministry. Their response to my sabbatical was, "What if something happens while you're gone? What will we do?" My answer was, "You'll pray to God, you'll let Christ hold you, you'll call our supply pastor, and you'll trust your sisters-and-brothers-in-Christ at church to hold you in their hearts and help you as they're able." And sure enough, one of the most fragile families had a major crisis just after I left; and sure enough, God provided all that they needed. When I returned, they told me the joy they had received in letting God be God, and in letting God move through the love of others.

My sabbatical was a time set apart to read, to pray, to soak myself in my Lutheran heritage, to relish time with my immediate and extended family, and to savor refreshing times of solitude. I read and prayed the Psalms, rejoicing in the depth and breadth of our humanness lifted to God, recalling God's faithfulness in every generation including our own. I read and prayed the Gospels and Paul's letters to the Romans and Galatians, experiencing daily the love of God for all people in and through Jesus Christ. I bought a small devotional book, suitable for traveling light, from which I read every day. I dabbled in a review of Hebrew and learned a smattering of German. I read works of Luther and about Luther, and all manner of books about the grace of God.

Rest was an essential part of my sabbatical. Rest is often a much neglected part of our spiritual journey. To rest, to keep sabbath, is to trust God to provide. Resting is a means of living out our faith that God is in control, and the world will still go on, even if we take a break. I intentionally paced myself, resisting the urge to cram my days full of activities. Alone and with my dear husband, I hiked in the Olympic Rainforest, on Mt. Rainier, down nearby trails, and just around our neighborhood. Rest included time to sit and watch rain drops on the window and to revel in sunshine that warmed the earth and beckoned spring flowers to bloom. In quiet moments all to myself, I contemplated the intersection of my reading and my life. The sweetness of those moments lingers on in my memory!

Rest included time to gather with precious friends I rarely see. When pastoral care needs are pressing in, my personal life is often relegated to the "back burner". How grateful I am for the grace of friends who love me still, after all these years! Together we broke bread at meals, and at worship. Rest was a gift I shared with my parents, in leisurely visits that were deliberately relaxed and not aimed "just" at care-giving. I spent time listening to them, cherishing their memories, and videoing some of their conversations. Before my sabbatical was over, I took my mother to see her brothers in the Midwest. Again, I sat and listened; again I recorded some of their conversations. My extended family were my "roots" throughout my childhood, as my parents, my brother, and I criss-crossed the country and the world, traveling wherever the Air Force stationed my father. From these dear aunts, uncles, and cousins I learned that there is no place on earth I can roam that is beyond their love; they opened my heart to understand how God's love is with me, even if I go to the uttermost ends of the sea! They rooted me so deeply in God's grace that even as a very young child, I knew that Jesus was with me wherever I went...which made my journeys to Germany a personal pilgrimage as well as a journey to mark historical moments in my Lutheran heritage.

Following in the footsteps of Martin Luther and contemplating his spiritual journey and the impact of his focus on grace was profound! Standing in Luther's room at Wartburg Castle, where he was sheltered to protect his life because he stood for grace when it was not popular nor politically correct, has kept me thinking, "Where does Christ bid me stand for grace, for the sake of others, even if it's not popular, even if it risks trusting my whole life to God?" Walking the streets of Wittenberg, from the Castle Church where he posted the 95 Theses, to St. Mary's where he served as parish pastor, to the parsonage

where he and Katie lived out God's love to the extent that they took into their home townfolk ill and dying from the plague...walking those streets brought home to me the power of the Gospel to move one man to trust God with even his doubts, his failings, his dying.

Having marked significant places and moments in Luther's life, I was privileged to find the home in which my parents and I lived during the Berlin Airlift. It, too, was a time of devastation and want in Germany. Bombed out shells of buildings were part of daily life. Germans were in dire need of jobs in order to feed their families. Like many Americans there to help rebuild, my parents hired a woman to help with housework. When another woman appeared on their doorstep pleading for a job, she became my "nursemaid". Then a woman who had fled East Germany and was without even shelter was brought to my parents, and they gave her a bedroom plus a job. All this they did on the salary of a Lieutenant! My parents knew how to rest in God, how to discern the difference between wants and needs, and how to share the grace of having enough with those who had little or nothing. Grace really does make all the difference in the world!

Traveling in Germany 54 years after I lived there, I was truly a foreigner. Over and over as we struggled to be understood, my husband and I experienced the hospitality of strangers and realized our dependency upon their goodwill. It welled up in us a profound sense of gratitude for God's will that we remember the sojourner in our gates, along with widows, orphans, and those in need. It gave deeper meaning to my cousin Fred's work among people of all nations, and forever enhanced my appreciation of what my parents quietly did, above and beyond the literal call of duty.

Thanks to connections through a friend back home, Chris and I were taken into the homes of three different German families. We listened, we shared, we prayed and worshipped, and like people in every generation and every culture, we celebrated our newly made friendships with special meals.

Love truly is the most amazing gift of all! My sabbatical emphasized, through all manner of serendipitous moments, how blessed we are to know the love of family, friends, strangers, and fellow Christians. Above all, my experiences underscored how essential God's love is for all life. The third day of my renewal program, I sat reading in our family room, and our house began to shake! Instantly, I thought, "Earthquake! Get under the doorway!" As I stood there alone in our home, watching the earth undulate outside and hearing the strange, almost moan of the quake and the rattle of dishes and pictures falling inside, I kept praying out loud, "God help us all!" After what seemed like a century (in reality it was 60 seconds), the motion ebbed, then ceased. I hurried outside as fast as my trembling legs could carry me, only to find a neighbor pounding on another door, crying out, "Is anybody here?" When I responded, she came running into my arms. I stood there, holding her, listening to her recount her terror. Then she confessed that her first instinct had been to duck under a table....only the table where she'd sought refuge had a glass top! Laughter bubbled up within us; the tension that gripped our bodies released its hold. Prayers of thanksgiving replaced our laments of

fear. Our cup of mercy overflowed! Later we learned the earthquake was the worst to hit our area in 40 years!

How much more plain can God make it? Every day is a gift!! A gift of grace! We did nothing to deserve life, nothing to deserve love. Yet we have such bounty!

Three months after I returned to Family of Grace, our congregation and I were called upon to share our gifts with a family in the community. A brave seven year old had lost his battle with cancer; his mother was overcome with grief. Added to her pain was the fact that she was unable to pay for his funeral. With the tremendous help of Lutheran fraternal organizations' matching funds, we raised the money for burial, plus living expenses for four months. Just as we were preparing his funeral, we woke to the shocking news of September 11, 2001. Suddenly the whole nation and the world were walking in the valley of the shadow of death.

Ministering in such a time of frantic terror, and now continuing to serve as pastor in a time of war, I can only continue by the discipline of tiny sabbaticals each day. Every day in prayer, I lay our concerns and celebrations at the feet of Jesus. Every day, I pause for at least a few moments to drink in the beauty of the world around me, whether shrouded in fog and rain or radiant with sunset sweeping across the face of Mt. Rainier. I remember whose love conceived us and created the world around us. I remember the One with whom Jacob wrestled in the night, and I thank God for grace that allows an open, honest relationship. Greed within myself, within our nation, and within the world flies in the face of God's abundant provision for us all, if only we share. I wrestle with God's gift of freedom that allows us to wreak such devastation upon people and upon the earth; yet I know, love cannot be forced. I know of pastors and congregations that feel compelled to preach politics, including how Christians should vote. And then I remember standing outside St. Mary's in Wittenberg, and looking up to its degrading carving of a pig. I recall the horrendous tract that Luther wrote against the Jews, out of his disappointment turned to anger that they rejected Jesus as the Messiah. Luther spared no vile in his tirade. I remember looking down from the carving to a memorial to Jews killed in every age because of hatred and bigotry. In the midst of a brass square is a cross, shaped by the earth pushing up against the forces of evil.

I remember the pilgrimage I made to Dachau, where I joined in the prayer, "Never Again!" It is holy ground, set apart lest we forget. Just beyond the gates where prisoners entered the work camp there was a small stream. I was struck by its tranquility and by the peace exuded by the trees and shrubs growing over and around the stream. Bending close, I could see a single berry clinging to one of the branches. It seemed to me that in God's goodness, God cares for each and every part of creation. No thing and no person is lost to God. Here at this camp, Nazis worked to eliminate any sense of individuality and any respect for God's diverse people. Sadly, one of the items they used to inculcate people against the Jews was Luther's ranting about them. It was enough to make me pause and wonder, how could one so steeped in grace as Luther was, be so graceless to any people God created, let alone God's chosen ones?

The answer that came from my meditations is that Luther epitomizes our need for grace! He shows what happens when we usurp God's work and take upon ourselves judging what each life must cut away in order to be the person God intends us to be.

And I come full circle, to my own need of grace...as a child of God, a wife, a mother, a daughter, a friend, a pastor... and I am reminded to pray for us all: family, congregation, friend, enemy, whoever that may be. We are, as said in the note scribbled by Luther and found in his pocket after he died, all beggars at Christ's table. It fortifies me to remember the grace that conceived us and the grace that redeems us from our hurt and anger, from our fear and pride, and from all the forces that press against us and would have us lose our humanity and forsake the likeness of God within us.

In light of my sabbatical, my ministry is shaped more and more by the depth and breadth of God's grace. In the years since my return, our congregation has experienced the day-to-day work of continued ministry. After periods of growth, we experienced a time of plateau and then decline in attendance and in the scope of some aspects of our ministry. A couple of years ago we set aside several weeks for small group Bible studies and for gathering as a whole to prayerfully consider the vision God would have us hold for our ministry. In the midst of that process, submerged conflict came to light.

It was a real temptation to just walk away; in fact, some have. But most have not, nor have I. Instead, we undertook a "Healthy Congregations" workshop that used a systems approach as developed by Peter Steinke and was led by an assistant to our bishop. Thanks to the grace of God, we have been able to speak openly and honestly about areas of concern. When we think of all that God has provided and all that we have come through, we are empowered to extend to each other the grace we all need to love each other, even at moments when we don't like what the other is doing! People have learned to own their thoughts and feelings and share them in ways that encourage growth. Some people with issues about me and my ministry have spoken directly with me. My goals are to hone some areas of my ministry they feel are most in need of improvement. Others have said they were touched by my openness to receiving critiques. The reality is that we all have room to grow. Our council has improved communication with the congregation and been more intentional in setting measurable goals. They have verbalized their limitations and the need for those not in leadership positions to work with us as the team Christ created us to be. Energy that had been waning post 9/11 is now more engaged. Were it not for God's grace, we could be at risk of closing. Instead we have a deep sense of the work God has given us in our community. This past summer we gave out 2,400 sack lunches; we supplied 100 back packs with school necessities; we are reaching out to HIV-AIDS victims in Ethiopia; and we are about to launch a tutor-mentoring program. Our worship is growing again, as we give and receive the grace we need. We are resting in God and trusting Christ to lead us. There are no quick fixes to ministry in any age, let alone ours in the "unchurched" Pacific Northwest. Grace gives us strength to grow in communicating the difference God's love makes in our world, whether we know it or not. Grace prods us to give our

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lives for the sake of the Gospel, so that others might know how deep and how wide God's love for them is.

Grace sustains and keeps us journeying in hope, and at the last, grace will bring us home!