

Courage and Grace

There will be three devotionals published per week on Thursdays, meant to be read on Friday, Monday, and Wednesday. They will also be posted on the church website, firstchurchgrandhaven.com.

Look at the Birds

Devotional for Friday by Pastor Tom Pettinga

Read: Matthew 6:25-27

I noticed something else on the path Dar and I walk. This time it wasn't the smile-giving yellow tulips. It was a number of broken bird egg shells. They were robins-egg blue. So I'm guessing they came from the nests of robins. Besides the color, I noticed something else: none of the eggs I saw were anywhere close to a tree, a tree where the red-breasts had built their nest. One of the parents had flown far from the nest before dropping the shells.

Now you undoubtedly know why God wired these creatures to do this. The adult robins had no intention of signaling to a predator where their clutch of defenseless chicks was located by simply pushing the empty shells to the ground below. No, they were dropped many yards away.

Jesus told us to "look at the birds of the air." He says that our Heavenly Father feeds these birds, cares for them, cares about them. Cares enough to build into their tiny brains the instinct to protect their young by playing a shell trick. Jesus uses the robins to tell us we needn't worry, should not worry - "do not worry," he says. And the reason for not worrying is that you and I are much more valuable than the birds he fusses over. If he feeds them, defends them, will he not much more so care for us and our needs!?

I've been a 'worried bird' these last few weeks, worrying about people in danger of falling sick from a rogue virus, worrying about folks out of work, people in danger of losing their businesses, their livelihoods. Worried about seniors cooped up and not able to see their kids, their grands, their friends. I've worried about too little action by some, too much control by others. Maybe you've been a worried bird too. Jesus reminds us that the birds themselves do not worry.

I've worn the mask in stores and washed my hands often, stayed home most of the time. I've tried to do due diligence. But the worrying has got to go! I ought to be talking to the Father more, listening less to my fears and concerns. Jesus says it doesn't work to worry in any case.

You and I, after all, are so much more valuable than birds to our Father. If he's watching over each feathered friend, we can rest in his watch care over those he calls his children for Jesus' sake. And if on your daily stroll you happen to see a broken egg shell, don't bother looking up to spot a nest. Your Father is looking down - on you. He's smiling. And he loves you.

Whitewater Living

*Devotional for Monday by Eric VanHouten
Originally published in Keys for Kids issue Jan-Feb-March 2019, edited for FGH.*

Read: Deuteronomy 31:1-8

A few years ago I was on a trip in Colorado with a bunch of other people—mostly high school students and other youth group leaders. To take a breather from the service work we were doing, and of course to simply have some fun, our group of 50-ish from Michigan went whitewater rafting. This is an activity that involves floating, steering, and rowing in a raft down fast, twisting rivers. Sometimes, whitewater rafting can be a little dangerous. This was one of those times.

I was rowing in the back of one of the rafts when we accidentally hit a rock that our guide and instructor called “The Crusher.” I was catapulted from the raft into the water, and the power of the flowing river and its currents pulled me further and further away from my raft while I bobbed up and down in the struggle between my vest floating upwards and the current pulling me down. Not only was it all scary, but it was even a bit embarrassing; I was the only person who had fallen out of the rafts so far! I couldn’t stop thinking about how far away I was drifting from what was keeping me safe.

Whether it’s being in rapids outside of your raft, being bullied at school, experiencing financial troubles, or maybe simply navigating a global pandemic, we all find ourselves in scary situations where we’re being pulled away and need help. Sometimes we see that raft floating away and don’t know what to do. Deuteronomy 31:6 says,

“Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid or terrified because of them, for the Lord your God goes with you; he will never leave nor forsake you.”

While this verse may be familiar, it’s one we must constantly remember. This verse and the passage come from Moses, here speaking words of encouragement to Israel and Joshua as they prepare to enter a new chapter of life without their familiar human leader (himself). What is his encouragement to the people of God? Don’t be afraid—God is with you. It’s simple, yet as important as it gets. We can’t pull ourselves back to safety, but we don’t have to, because God has promised to be with us.

We get to live life knowing that Jesus is there helping us through it. We believe our strength and our ability to show courage and to be brave, even when we’re scared and hurting, comes from this fact that God is right there beside us, protecting us and extending an arm to pull us back into our rafts. Let us pray, as we continue along this uncertain and trying path, that we are a people strong and courageous, even if we find ourselves afraid and in need of help. God is there for you!

A Life of Grace and Truth

Devotional for Wednesday by Art Tuls

Read: John 1:14; 4:1-42

The giver of grace and truth is Jesus Christ. He was full of both. We see this clearly in John 4 when Jesus talked with a Samaritan woman. According to custom and tradition, he should have turned his back on her. But instead he turned to her and began a conversation of grace.

But not only grace. He gently forced her to face the whole truth. Her life was a mess, and she needed to admit it. Finally, graciously, the whole truth also included a gift for her: “living water,” Jesus said. Life to the full; life everlasting. A life of grace and truth he gave her. He gave this life not only to this woman of woe, but soon also to others in her town, all Samaritans, typically despised by most Jews. Many received this great gift of life, full of grace and truth.

Throughout the gospel of John we see Jesus feeding people, teaching, healing, reaching out to touch the untouchables, and living by grace and truth all the way to the cross, where we hear him pray: “Father, forgive them, for they don’t know what they are doing.” Grace and truth. They define the life of Christ.

I wonder how different they are really, grace and truth. Maybe each is empowered by the other. Maybe grace reaches its full power only in the light of truth; maybe truth is impotent without grace to direct the way. John teaches us that they work together perfectly in Jesus Christ. Maybe they always belong together, nourishing our lives.

Like leaves and roots nourish the tree. The roots never see the light, but the benefits of light come to them through the work of leaves. The leaves are far from the soil, but the benefits of rich, wet dirt come to them through the work of roots. Leaves and roots need each other, and together they bring wondrous, flourishing life to the whole tree. So it is with grace and truth.

Maybe a good theme for us during these strange times would be “Living in grace and truth.” Our decisions as individuals and as a society need to be guided by truth and challenged, too. Let truth point the way. At the same time we need the warm glow of God’s grace, and so does everyone else. Our Lord’s examples urge us to receive grace and truth for ourselves, gladly. But they also challenge us to offer grace and truth to others, both within and outside our church family. We want to create a community of grace and truth within the walls of First Church, and also to share grace and truth with God’s greater world.

So we support hurting people and needy ones both locally and around the world, remembering that Jesus loved even a desperate Samaritan woman. We try to be a warm and welcoming place where people of all sorts, with various abilities and disabilities, various gifts and burdens, feel safe and warm. Like many fellow citizens we struggle to find the truth in church, in the media, and even in the political arena during a divisive time, where the truth sometimes seems obscure or twisted. We also sometimes witness a woeful lack of grace, when the truth is used as a weapon.

Living in grace and truth—a powerful theme for us in this season, as we seek to follow a Savior who is full of both. Sometimes we succeed, and then there are smiles all around; sometimes we fail, and then we trust God’s grace again to be sufficient, and his truth again to re-direct us. Let us all be open daily to God’s all-sufficient grace and his

Life-giving truth. All in all, let’s remember that a life filled with grace and truth is a great gift. And a great calling, too.