

## **Stewardship of Grace God's Injunction to Love People even if We Don't Like Them**

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Please join me in prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be acceptable in your sight and help us to understand your admonition to be stewards of grace. Amen

I am very thankful to be standing before you today. I am thankful that the pandemic is diminishing, that we can come together again for in-person worship, and that skills learned during Covid allow others to participate from beyond the walls of the sanctuary and at times convenient to them. I am also thankful that Pastor Debra has given me the opportunity to speak with you about my interpretation of stewardship. Thank you, Pastor Debra. And finally, I am thankful to be able to stand and walk to the pulpit because I could not do that during most of the past year. Thanks to incredible support from Orlene and the marvels of modern medicine, my recovery from a rare disease is almost complete. That the disease rendered me unable to walk precisely during the period of Covid lockdown is almost certainly coincidental and not evidence of divine intervention to test me without preventing me from continuing most of my professional responsibilities. But the timing was fortuitous and I'm grateful that the transition from in-person to virtual events during the Covid lockdown made the experience less distressing than it could have been. The same is true for our church.

As most of you know, I spent more than two decades in Washington. During that time, I learned that it is often useful to begin a talk by telling people what you intend to say. The military calls this bottom-line up front or BLUF. And, since I am talking about the military and we have just celebrated Veterans Day, let me say thank you to all our veterans and those currently serving in uniform.

Providing an overview of where I'm headed also helps keep me on track and enables listeners to fill in gaps of language or logic when my mouth gets ahead of my brain. I have titled this talk "Stewardship of Grace." The reason is not only because that is the subject of the scripture lesson that Bill Davidson read to us this morning, but also and more importantly because I believe this dimension of stewardship to be as or even more important than those centered on pledges of time, talent, and financial support.

After many months of separation, departures from normal procedures, and limited opportunities for direct personal interaction, we can all use a refresher course on interpersonal relations. We need to burnish or relearn skills necessary to avoid unintended or counterproductive alienation of friends and fellow congregants. The essence of my intended message is, "God loves us—all of us—and God expects—demands—that we love one another." God's grace applies to everyone, even to people who disagree with us or act in ways we find distressing or deplorable. As stewards of

God's grace, we are enjoined to love people even if we don't like them. Failure to do so is not only a failure to comply with God's admonition; it is also an impediment to effective collective action and maintenance of a healthy and growing church community.

My use of the word "maintenance" to describe a healthy church community was deliberate. As the list of activities in the bulletin and soon to be posted on our website make clear, First Church remained incredibly active despite restrictions on in-person gatherings and other restraints during the very long "year of Covid." Media reports, chance encounters, and a recent conversation with our District Superintendent indicate that many churches are struggling, in part because they were unable or did not try to find new ways to address the spiritual and material needs of their members and communities. We did. First Church is not the only church that did so, and we did not succeed in all that we attempted, but we are emerging from the pandemic with a record of accomplishment that provides reason for hope and excitement as we look toward the future. None of us want to go through the Covid experience again, but it wasn't all bad. As the many testimonials shared by members of our congregation during the stewardship campaign demonstrate—and let me interrupt myself here to add a personal word of thanks to all who spoke to us about activities dear to them—we remain a vibrant fellowship and are now more deeply engaged with the broader community than has been the case for many years.

As I said during my remarks at the start of the stewardship campaign, conceiving, organizing, and running such activities does not "just happen." Going from "good ideas" to actual events takes a lot of work. It also takes structure, leadership, staff, and follow-through. First Church as an organization provides the structure, staff, leadership, and mobilizational capacity that allowed and enabled us to do all that we did. Together we did far more than any of us could do alone. The core idea for many of our activities came from one or a few individuals, but the ability to pull things together—to pull them off—required collective action. First Church provided and continues to provide incredible organizational capacity to do good. The stewardship campaign generates the financial resources that make everything else possible. But money alone is insufficient. It also takes the time, talents, and enthusiasm of the entire congregation. And that requires the ability of people to put aside differences and work together for the greater good. To do God's work.

Notwithstanding all the good we accomplished and the many ways in which we enabled our members to interact with one another, the picture as we emerge from the pandemic is not entirely rosy. Interaction at a distance saves driving times and facilitates more simultaneous activity, but there are downsides and costs. One such downside that I find both understandable and troubling is diminished attentiveness to the body language and feelings of others and the erosion of civility and patience. To describe the situation in this way probably overstates the problem. But I perceive enough of a problem—both manifest and looming—as sufficiently serious to be troubled by what I see. That is the reason I have chosen to speak on the subject of grace and our obligation to love one another even—and especially—when we feel distressed or hurt by the words, actions, or attitudes of others in our church community.

I began by mentioning one lesson from my time in Washington. Another lesson is that it isn't necessary to like someone in order to work with him or her to solve problems or achieve shared or compatible goals. Friendship is desirable and certainly has great value, but it isn't necessary to be best friends forever to respect and work together. Indeed, a very common saying in Washington is, "If you want a friend, get a dog." Another, even harsher, aphorism is, "A friend in Washington is someone who will stab you in the chest (instead of in the back)." Happily, at least in my experience, the situation is not as dire as these sayings suggest. But passionate debate about contentious and consequential issues often involves calculated efforts to discredit proposals by attacking the people or organizations who advocate them. Experienced players understand that such slanderous behavior is "part of the game" and most don't take it personally. But it helps to have a thick skin and, when tempted to resort to disparaging behavior, to remember that what goes around comes around. You reap what you sow.

In the continuing game of politics and policymaking, players come together again and again. During my final years in Washington, I met with basically the same set of senior officials in the White House situation room 3-4 times per week. In theory, we all had the same options available to people who become dissatisfied with the organizations of which they are a part. Those options are exit (quit or leave), voice (complain and demand change), and loyalty (endure for the larger good). Exit—leaving for reasons of "principle" or hurt feelings—was a much less viable option than it is for members of church communities. We were bound together by shared commitments to the nation and the administration of which we were a part. Members of church communities are also bound by their commitment to the Church, the local church, and subgroups within the church. If the threads that constitute those commitments fray, exit becomes more likely and more costly—to individuals and to the organization.

In Washington, it doesn't help to get mad and plotting to get even is seldom a sensible strategy because "getting even" or "winning" are almost never as important as dealing with the next difficult problem. Today's adversary could very easily be tomorrow's ally and most of the time nobody is going to care about who said what in a previous round. Understanding the nature of the "game" makes "forgiveness" almost automatic because there is little point in holding a grudge against people for doing or saying things they thought necessary to obtain an outcome that they really wanted to achieve. Political expediency normally makes it prudent not only to forgive but also to forget even a very painful slight.

What does any of this have to do with God's grace, the stewardship of grace, and our own situation coming out of the pandemic? How does describing expedient political behavior in Washington help us to understand and apply God's admonition to love one another? The simplest way to make my point is to say that if widely and rightfully disparaged political actors can adopt an attitude of forgiveness for the sake of achieving more meaningful objectives than defeating a foe or winning for the sake of ego gratification, surely the ability to forgive—to act with grace—in a Christian church should be easier and more common. But that isn't always the case.

Henry Kissinger famously observed that the intensity of passion and conflict in educational institutions is so high because the stakes are so low. Something analogous might be the case in church committees. Or, more accurately, it can become the case if members lose sight of the higher purposes for which the Church exists and that they, as Christians, have come together to spread the Word and make the world a better place. We don't "do church stuff" for personal gratification, we do it in service to the Lord.

First Church is a different manifestation of government and other organizations that exist to achieve great purposes by mobilizing the talents and resources of diverse individuals and constituencies. What we do is different. We are—or strive to be—a spiritual community. Washington doesn't. It has different goals and plays by different rules. We should be "better" than Washington politicians when it comes to practicing grace and loving one another. We should be, but are we?

In our church community, we neither expect nor find it easy to tolerate "bad" or "unchristian" behavior in our interactions with one another. We do not expect to see it and find it very unsettling to witness or be the target of personal criticism or unfair attacks. Behaviors that are readily sloughed off in DC have a sting and staying power in our—or any other—church community. Because we think of the church community as our church family, the surprise, dismay, and durability of injudicious or unthinking remarks is magnified. We all know that, and we all know that working together to accomplish the work of the Church should transcend personal ego and other less lofty considerations. We know that, but more than a year of Covid restrictions and limited opportunities to practice good interpersonal behavior seem to have dulled awareness of how important it is to treat one another with respect, dignity, and understanding. In short, to love one another.

My goal today is not to chastise anyone, but if you think the shoe fits, you might want to reflect upon slights you have given or received. If we are to move forward, by which I mean to build on what we achieved during the pandemic and on what First Church members during the past 125 years have bequeathed to us, we need to draw a line between past unpleasanties and future possibilities. It is, of course, never too late to offer an apology to clear the air and facilitate future collaboration. But it is almost always counterproductive to withhold cooperation and commitment to achieving Church goals until past hurts have been addressed. Grace is about love and love is about unconditional acceptance and forgiveness. God might appreciate a confession of sin but does not demand one as a precondition for loving us. As stewards of God's grace, we are admonished and expected to follow his example.

Nowhere does the Bible say that showing grace to others as God shows it to us will be easy. There is no simple ritual or prayer that will make it easier to love those who have behaved badly toward us or toward people we love in the more traditional meaning of that word. Many of you, like I, have asked God why he has made it necessary for me to interact with people I do not like. The answer to such prayers, at least in my experience, is that he has given me yet another opportunity to practice grace and to grow in my

understanding of what it is to be a Christian. Loving—showing grace—only to people who agree with or flatter us is not part of the deal. Everyone on earth is a Child of God and loved by God. Knowing that is sometimes easier than acting on that knowledge. God doesn't expect us to be perfect. But he does expect us to try. Walking away from a difficult or uncomfortable situation does not acquit us of our responsibility to practice grace in situations that have made us unhappy. Forgiving others is almost always more consistent with God's grace than is withholding forgiveness until others have apologized.

I do not know the results of the stewardship campaign or how much money we will have to continue old and initiate new programs proposed by our church committees. I hope we will have abundant resources. But no matter how great or small they prove to be, we have the capacity to do great amount of good. How well we are able to work together with trust, love, and commitment will be even more important than the amount of money we have to spend.

Thank you.