

**First Parish Congregational Church
United Church of Christ, Yarmouth Maine**

**Sermon by
Rev. Kate Dalton
June 16, 2019**

**Scripture: Acts 13:1-5, 13-16a, 42-47; 14:1-2, 21-28
Ephesians 3:1-13**

Brian Peterson, Professor of New Testament at Lutheran Theological Southern Seminary in Columbia, South Carolina offers these thoughts on this morning's reading from Ephesians:

In verse 2, the NRSV speaks of a "commission." A better translation here would be "stewardship" (New English Translation). The thought is not that God graciously gave Paul a position of authority (i.e., "commissioning" him), but that God gave Paul the role of being a servant of grace. God has placed the treasure of the gospel into our hands as its stewards. Being good stewards means, as verse 2 indicates, that this stewardship is for the sake of others, and so we exercise this stewardship of God's grace by giving it away with bold freedom, through our words and through our lives.¹

Paul is a servant of grace. Paul's tasked with stewarding – looking after grace - for the sake of others. I wonder how our lives would be different if we went through each day thinking of yourself as a steward of grace?

God extends grace that is completely out of all proportion to what is deserved or merited.²

The story of the prodigal son provides an excellent illustration. A man has two sons. One asks for his inheritance early goes away and squanders it all and eventually returns home with nothing. The other works diligently for his father and is dutiful. When the "irresponsible"

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2735

² <https://progressivechristianity.org/resources/affirmations-and-confessions-of-a-progressive-christian-layman-grace-and-salvation/>

son returns, the father does not scold him – rather he celebrates that he is alive, that he has come home. This is grace.

Think about that story for a moment – how does it make you feel? I suppose it may depend on who you identify with in the story – but I’m a bit of a rule follower and so I would more likely have been like the son who stayed home and did what he “supposed” to do. And you know what, if my brother had done what the other son in the story had done, and then returned home to great acclamation from my father – I would have been steaming mad. My brother has been unbelievably demanding and irresponsible – and then he returns home and you shower him with the best you have to offer. You’ve got to be kidding me.

I think given the culture that we live in – it’s pretty hard to live as servants of grace. It goes against our cultural values. Hard work yields positive results. Irresponsibility can come with horrible consequences. And if you’re suffering because you’ve been irresponsible – so be it. Grace calls us to move beyond this cultural narrative. Grace calls us to be compassionate at all times – not just when we think compassion is deserved.

In his book entitled *Habit of Grace* David Mathis comments on how belonging to a local church can help enable us to learn to be stewards of grace. He says, ...where there is covenant membership in the local church is the place where lives flourish as we experience receive God's grace through significant relationships.

So, for instance, we wouldn’t say, "Well I love these people enough, I don’t need to commit to them." Rather, we’d say, "I love these people enough that I’m willing to commit to them in sickness and in health, when times are joyful and when times are sorrowful," as you would do in a marriage. Hopefully you wouldn’t say, "I love her enough; we don’t need a commitment and we don’t need a piece of paper." No! The question is, "Do you love her enough to commit; to be there in sorrow, in pain, and in sickness?"

That’s the opportunity we have in covenant fellowship. We say, "I love these people enough that I’m going to commit to be there in the

hardest of times. In the worst of times. When they're the dryest. When they're the most depressed. When they the most need help, I want to be there and I want to be God's means of grace in their life. And I want to be that means of grace in my life as well."³

This morning we gather for our annual meeting. This is work of our covenanted community. Time when we come together because of our common commitment to this local church. Time where we make space to hear one another's voices and to honor one another despite our differences. Time where we can intentionally practice receiving and extending grace to one another in preparation for doing the same when we leave this place and go out into the world. The call of our faith is not just to participate as a covenant member of a community. The call of our faith is to spread the good news of God's love to the world at large.

A parting thought from Brian Peterson, Verse 10 contains one of those breathtaking statements about the mission of the church that are part of Ephesians. Here, the purpose of the church is to make this wisdom of God known to the "rulers and authorities in the heavenly places." These are the powers that many believed threatened the world, powers that might be visible in political and social dynamics but that had a reality which was more than human. We might see such powers today in the form of racism, perpetual poverty, oppressive political and economic structures, or the ways in which all systems are bent in favor of the few. In the face of such realities, the church is not called to survive, or to increase membership, or to make people feel better. It is called to be the sign, promise, and embodiment of what God intends for the whole world...

May we strive to live as servants, stewards of grace. Amen.

³ <https://www.crossway.org/articles/cultivating-habits-of-grace-day-4/>