

A culture of grace

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Names are important, I believe. When I first learned, in junior high Latin class, that my name was also that of a Roman goddess (the goddess of the moon and the hunt, I was told), it had a positive effect on my self-esteem. At least temporarily.

Some people are named on purpose, after parents and beloved grandparents, after screen stars and presidents. Perhaps there are hopes involved. Perhaps this child will be like Grandpa Joe, or Grandma Ellen; perhaps this child will be president someday, or swing a bat, or sing arias.

Names are important, I believe. I love the name of my church: Grace. In fact, I think it is fair to say that I came here, at least in part, because they were a church named Grace. There were other reasons, of course: they have an amazing pre-school, for one thing. They love to study and said that they were hungry to learn more about God and faith. They worship in different varieties. They began a homeless ministry in their county.

And their name is Grace. Names are important. When they were doing strategic planning, they had the name of their church listed as one of their strengths. Because I believe that grace is the heart and the root of our faith, it is the one thing that we most have to share with the world, but it is somehow notoriously difficult to get a hold of.

What is grace? What does it look like? What would it be like to actually practice grace, the grace of God?

I have been thinking about this lately, because I am thinking about culture and strategy, strategy and culture. Pretty soon, we will start developing a strategy: where do we want to go, and how do we want to get there? What will be the steps along the way? And I can't shake the idea that the name of my congregation is Grace, and that this name is a strength. But what does it look like? And what does it tell us?

Maybe the question before strategy is this one: who are we, and who do we WANT to be? Are we gracious? Do we want to grow in grace, and in graciousness? What does that even look like? Is it just being nice? Is it biting your tongue and remaining silent?

What does grace look like in a community of faith?

I can't help thinking about something Nadia Bolz-Weber said, about her church, House of All Sinners and Saints. She says to every group who wants to join, that there will be a point where the church, or someone in the church, will hurt them, or disappoint them. Or, there will be a point when you will be the one who hurts or disappoints someone else. At that point, she says, please do not walk away and leave. Because if you do, you will miss the grace of God, the power of forgiveness and reconciliation.

That's what she said, or something like it. And I thought—this is true, but it is so hard. There are times when it is true, we need to walk away. But there are other times, times when someone has disappointed us, or we have disappointed someone else. There are times when we have hurt one another, but instead of turning away, we have said, "I'm sorry." "I forgive you."

And that is grace. It is: I don't agree with you, but you are my sister, and I love you. It is: You have hurt me, but I forgive you, and I will want to serve God together. It is: I have screwed up and failed and crashed and burned, and you have given me another chance.

Is that who we are? Is that who we want to be?

Names are important.

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