

June 7, 2020
Trinity Sunday
Twelfth Sunday of Online Worship

Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

John 1:16-18
2 Corinthians 8:1-7

Some years ago I had the opportunity to meet World renowned violinist and conductor Itzhak Perlman. I'll admit



I was star-struck. Perlman is a Grammy, Emmy, and Medal of Freedom recipient, and – here's what makes him tops in my book...he's also great friends with Alan Alda, M*A*S*H's Hawkeye Pierce.

In spite of his incredible talent and success Perlman is as down-to-earth as can be. Here's the maestro offering the Star Spangled Banner on his 300-year old Soil Stradivarius at Citi Field in New York. Sorry Phillies fans.



Perlman and his wife Toby, run a music school in a community where I once lived. If you are ever in Southwest Florida be sure to take in one of their concerts!



There's a story. Maybe it's apocryphal; maybe it's true. Either way, I think it's a great example of where we are right now and where we need to go.

The story according to the Houston Chronicle took place on November 18, 1995.ⁱ Perlman was on the stage at Lincoln Center in New York City. If you've ever seen him in concert you know that getting onto the stage is no small task for Perlman. At age four, he contracted polio. The resulting paralysis left him able to walk, but with great effort and the aide of leg braces and two arm crutches. To see him come on stage, one painful step at a time is a lesson in courage all by itself.

He sits down slowly, puts his crutches on the floor, undoes the clasps on his leg braces, tucks one foot back and extends the other foot forward. Then he bends down, picks up the violin, and puts it under his chin.

All of this takes several minutes, and the audience waits patiently, even reverently. Finally Perlman nods to the conductor and begins the song.

Except on that night in November something went wrong. Just as he finished the first few measures, one of the strings on his violin suddenly broke. You could hear it snap all across the auditorium. There was no question about what happened and what he would have to do next – he would have to gather his crutches, replace his braces and make his way off stage to repair the string.

But that is not what Itzhak Perlman did. Instead, he simply closed his eyes for a moment, and then signaled the conductor to start again. He played. He played with more power and passion and purity than his audience had ever heard.

Every violinist knows that it is impossible to play a symphonic work with just three strings. You and I know that, but that night, Itzhak Perlman refused to know it. People said that you could see him modulating, changing, and recomposing the piece as he played. At one point it sounded like he was de-tuning the strings to get a new sound from them, a sound they had never made before.

When he finished, the audience exploded in applause, jumped to their feet, cheering wildly. Then he raised his bow to quiet the room – and said, not boastfully, but in a quiet, reverent tone, “You know, sometimes it is the artist’s task to find out how much music you can make with what you have left.”

What is true in music is true in life. Itzhak Perlman is a great example of grace under pressure. I think it was Hemingway who defined courage as grace under pressure.

Grace. We’ve been hearing a lot about it in the past few months. Our stewardship theme for this year is called “Grace Notes.” We’ve been enjoying email and blog notes from Woods members, letters describing their personal experience of God’s grace, and what it’s like for them to be part of this fellowship we call Woods.

To all who wrote Grace Notes: thank you for your courage. John, the gospel writer was correct: *From his fullness we have all received: grace upon grace.* All that we are going through right now has convinced me even more how blessed we are to know Jesus Christ and to make him known. You and I – we have received, grace upon grace – God’s grace, in our severe ordeal of affliction.

A severe ordeal of affliction – that’s the phrase the Apostle Paul uses to describe the situation of the first century Christians of Macedonia, the region where young churches were planted in Philippi, Beorea, and Thessalonica in what is now Turkey and Greece. At the time our second lesson was written, these believers were experiencing harassment, assault, systemic injustice, false arrest, and grinding poverty.

Paul, writing to the church in Corinth, a much more privileged group of believers, holds up the Macedonians as an example of grace under pressure.

This is 2 Corinthians 8, beginning at verse 1. Listen now to what the Spirit is saying to the church:

We want you to know, brothers and sisters, about the grace of God that has been granted to the churches of Macedonia; for during a severe ordeal of affliction, their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.

For, as I can testify, they voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints - and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves first to the Lord and, by the will of God, to us that we might urge Titus that, as he had already made a beginning, so he should also complete this generous undertaking among you. Now as you excel in everything - in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in utmost eagerness, and in our love for you - so we want you to excel also in this generous undertaking.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

a severe ordeal of affliction...that overflowed in a wealth of generosity.

What a statement! With so many suffering in similar ways today this passage has taken on renewed meaning for me.

Last Sunday we read the story of Pentecost, and heard how the Holy Spirit came upon the believers helping them to overcome their sorrow and empowering them to speak God's word, speak truth to power, speak of the saving grace of Jesus Christ!

Twenty years have passed since last Sunday (seems like it, doesn't it?) What I mean is, there's a twenty years gap, between events on Pentecost, and the situation Paul is describing here – faithful people, Gentile Christians, challenged by a severe ordeal of hardship, they are begging Paul and Silas for the opportunity to give aide to Jewish Christians who were also suffering.

There is a racial element here. Earlier these Gentile converts had not been accepted by the Jewish Christians. They were scorned, considered less. And now Paul, who is a Jew called God to minister to Gentiles (I love this) and explains how the poor in Macedonia gave. These are Paul's words:

...according to their means, and even beyond their means begging us earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints.

Wow! How much different the world would be if every one of us practiced that kind of generosity, loved our enemies, and prayed for those who persecute us that way?

Now don't get me wrong. Paul and the Macedonian Christians weren't doormats. Paul dedicated his life to the cause of racial equality and justice. And he wanted to make sure that the Corinthians, who were sometimes a bit slow on the uptake, heard the call to get involved too.

They remind me of the farmer in a story I told at the Wednesday Bible Study last week. And I told it wrong. Here's the actual story.

An elder from the church came to visit a certain farmer asking him to help support the ministries of the church. They talked about how hard times were and wondered when times would get better. Then the elder said:

“If you won \$5 million in the lotto, would you give a million to God?”

“Absolutely I would,” answered the farmer.

“If you had a dozen cows would you donate one of ‘em for God’s work?”

“‘Course I would!” announced the farmer.

“If you had three pigs would you give one of ‘em to God?”

“Whoa, now that’s not fair,” objected the farmer. “You know I got three pigs.”

The Macedonians may have only had 3 pigs, if that. Yet their love overflowed in a wealth of generosity. That’s what the grace of God does. Paul urges the Corinthians to excel in that same grace. I guess you could say they are writing their own Grace Notes.

Gratitude, inspired by God’s grace leads to generosity. It’s worth noting that Paul never once mentions money in his appeal to the Corinthians. He talks about the grace of God, which is the basis for all giving.

He uses words like ministry, service, partnership, gifts, generosity. He doesn’t look at giving as a money-making proposition...but as a spiritual practice. He doesn’t consider it fund-raising.

Generosity is a response – in love, an outpouring of gratitude for all that God has done.

I hope that’s how we at Woods think of giving. Yes, the church needs operating money to spread the hope-filled reconciling message of Christ in the world, but that is only part of the reason why I give to Woods. I give to Woods because God has given to me. Grace upon grace, *good measure, pressed down...running over*ⁱⁱ has been put in my lap, and Jesus said:

*From whom much is given, much is also required.*ⁱⁱⁱ

In this moment -- this wondrous, horrifying, historic moment, I’m feeling some pressure. Are you? It is holy pressure, healthy pressure, like birth pangs for a new world about to be born. It is pressure to do the right thing. Do you feel it? Do you feel the sadness, the rage and the opportunity?

I want to be part of this new thing: the solution, the salvation of this troubled world that God put in place before the world began. And I want YOU to be part of it! That is my Grace Note, and the reason I commit the gifts of my heart and my wallet to the ministry of Woods Church.

It seems to me that the cross of Christ is the ultimate Grace Note. The sacrifice God made for us in Jesus exposes prejudice, violence, and all other death-tending ways of the world -- these are anything but God’s ways. On the cross we see God’s love and justice perfectly combined in sacrifice. In the end self-giving love is all that matters.

James Cone, in his book The Cross and the Lynching Tree, says that Martin Luther King, Jr. knew exactly what it meant to pick up his cross daily. From the time he accepted leadership in the Movement to the time he preached his last sermon – he knew that he might have to give everything for freedom.

He learned that from Jesus. By the will of God he gave himself fully – to us. So let's make it count. Let's play a new song for a new world where all people are acknowledged as equal, where everyone born has the chance to reach his or her potential in a world where brutality, disease, and poverty are permanently a thing of the past and where peace and community reign.

It can only happen by God's power; and by God's grace we will do our part.

Paul says that the Macedonians gave themselves *first to the Lord* and then, by the will of God, to the church. That's the correct order. That is amazing grace.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

ⁱ "Perlman makes history the hard way" *Houston Chronicle*, February 10, 2001

ⁱⁱ Luke 6:38

ⁱⁱⁱ Luke 12:48