

Gene McAfee
Lyndhurst Community of Faith Church
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Texts: “Grounded in God’s grace, we nurture kindness and compassion,” from the LCFC Vision Statement, and “For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all,” from Titus 2:11

Digging into our Vision Statement, which is what Francis and I decided to spend the second half of this summer doing through our preaching, really blows my skirt up, because I’m a text kind of guy, which is a little ironic for a guy who doesn’t, by and large, text. I’m into texts, but I don’t text, because the way I do texts and the way most people do texts are very different.

Texts, for me, are like vacations. They’re adventures. They’re time away from my daily daily. Texts, as the Bible and our Vision Statement are, are made up of sentences, and each of those sentences is a little trip of its own, like a day trip from the city where you’re based, or a brief poke down a lane or an alley, or a path that forks off into the woods.

When you set off on the brief journey of a sentence, you start at the capital letter and you stop when you get to the period. That sentence is a trip – cognitively, it gets us from here to there – and it might come with little pauses along the way in the form of commas and semicolons and colons. Those pauses help us experience the journey by slowing us down, by telling our minds to make a little dogleg right here, or to take a breath, enjoy the scenery, and wonder where we’re going. Those pauses are valuable, as the psalmist reminds us: “Be still, and know that I am God.”

But for many of us, being still is an ordeal, and that’s not a new problem. The French philosopher-theologian, Blaise Pascal, wrote in 1669, “All of humanity’s problems stem from our inability to sit quietly in a room by ourselves.”

It’s often thought that we don’t like being alone, but sometimes, even when we’re with others, we can’t be still; it seems that we have to be doing something. Life, for many of us, is relentless activity, and stillness is experienced as an interruption.

Think back to the last time the plane didn’t take off as expected; we call that being grounded, which happens to be the first word of the clause that I get to preach on this morning from our Vision Statement: “Grounded in God’s grace, we nurture kindness and compassion.”

Grounded.

“We’re sorry, ladies and gentlemen, but the captain says it’ll be another three hours before we’re cleared for take-off, so if you’d like to spend a lot of your vacation money on overpriced beverages to take your irritated edge off, we’ll be around with the jolly trolley in a little while. And thank you again for flying What’s Up Airlines.”

That’s one way to be grounded, and most of us hate it. Most of us live in a steady state of impatience, rushing here, rushing there, and usually, like the White Rabbit, rushing late, or rushing on Oxford time, as Lewis Carroll intended that character to embody, where most things start at five minutes past the appointed time.

Have you noticed that the more technology we have to help us get to our commitments on time, the more frequently we're late? From where I live at 1089 Avondale Road in South Euclid to where we are in the sanctuary this morning at 5312 Mayfield Road in Lyndhurst, Google Maps tells me, is 2.9 miles. I can walk that in about 45 minutes. I can drive it in about eight minutes. Why should I ever be late to something here at the church building when I have an automobile to get me there in a fraction of the time nature would get me here without mechanical intervention?

Or how about showing up late for Zoom meetings, like I sometimes do for morning prayers? All I have to do is join the Zoom meeting on the laptop I'm preaching from right now and where I spend a good many of my working hours. And I just have to walk from my study to the deck so that I can pray amidst the foliage of my lilac bushes, which is a distance of about 30 feet. Why on earth should I ever be late for Wednesday prayers? And yet, more often than I'd like, I am. "I'm late, I'm late, for a very important date." So says the White Rabbit, so say we all so much of the time.

So being grounded – being forcibly yanked out of our rushed and rushing routines – drives us nuts, even as we drive ourselves nuts with our insane schedules.

But perhaps being grounded is also an opportunity, one of those many occasions when we have the option of responding to life with our best – or with our worst – selves.

You know what I'm talking about.

When the whole northeast region of North America went dark one hot August afternoon back in 2003 because the electrical grid melted down, and younger neighbors checked on older neighbors to make sure they weren't suffocating in the heat. The routine came to a screeching halt then, and some of us got to be our best selves.

Or when the whole planet was socked and shocked with a virus that none of us knew how to handle – How contagious was it? Can we get it from door handles? Is the blood supply safe? Are children immune from it? – and we saw both the best of us – think Italians leaning out over their balconies banging pots and pans together to welcome home weary first-responders and medical workers – and, of course, we also saw the worst of us, people hoarding, blaming, and pointing fingers.

When nature - God - circumstances - whatever - tears us out of our busy routines, stops us in our tracks, and strips us of those buoys and moorings that keep us oriented on the sea of life – when those stabilizers are gone, on what, then, do we rely? How do we cope? What will get us fully functional again as God intends us to function?

Being grounded in God's grace will. Being grounded in God's grace as a sunflower is grounded in God's earth is a way to get back on track, indeed, from my perspective, the best way to get back on track. Or to get on the track for the first time. Being pulled from the world's mad rush, being stalled in stillness and calm, being forced to do that which the world calls a waste of time – that's not a bad thing if it's God's grace that's grounding us.

Our Vision Statement says that we nurture kindness and compassion from our being grounded in God's grace. I saw such kindness and compassion at work Friday afternoon as I was driving home from here. Let me close by telling you about it.

I was nearly home. I turned right onto Belvoir from Mayfield Road and was headed toward Adrian Road. City workers were mowing the median. As I approached the intersection of Ardmore Road, I could see a city worker in his neon green tee-shirt standing in the middle of Belvoir Boulevard, glancing back and forth between my

approaching vehicle and something further up ahead. He looked as though he was about to put his hand up to stop me, so I started slowing down, wondering what was going on. And then I could see it. I could see the dog in the road who had slipped its leash, and I could see the woman running into the road after it, scooping up her pooch and getting them both safely back on the sidewalk. The city worker had seen what was happening and had immediately climbed off his mower to stop traffic. It all happened in less than a minute. With the dog and the woman safely on the sidewalk again, the man returned to his mower, we waved to each other as I passed, and I gave thanks for the grace of God which is waiting to ground us.

The text from Titus says, "For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all." Is the man on the mower saved? Traditional Christian theology would force me to say I don't know. I don't know if that man goes to church, ever went to church, or ever has any intention of going to church. If he's Muslim, probably not. But has salvation come to him? From what I saw on Friday afternoon, it sure looked like it to me.

"Grounded in God's grace, we nurture kindness and compassion."

advocate justice for all creation
spark a new vision of spirited hope.

Gene, I, too, like texts; particularly biblical texts. There are certainly a few stories in particular that blow my skirt up - as you are wont to say. (Is that a Marilyn Monroe reference, btw?)

The text Jill just read is one of my favorites – probably within the top three.

As a youngster, I would have said Ezekiel’s vision of the Valley of the Dry Bones (Ez 37:1-14) was probably number one. The graphic imagery of God creating a vast multitude out of, not just bones, but dried and dusty bones, depleted of any juicy life, provides such hope for me. And the fact that it wasn’t God creating alone, this time around, but God relying on the prophet to cajole life out of those dusty bones—to speak life into being; and the prophet’s willingness to do, because, “O God, you know (these bones can live).” Oh, great is your faithfulness, steadfast prophet! And, of course, through the power of the RUACH (wind/breath/spirit) of God, it happens.

The story of Philip and the Ethiopian eunuch contains many of the same elements: an agent of God in the wilderness empowered by the Holy Spirit. Except in this story, the great resurrection has already happened. Right? Philip is working *after* the resurrection of the Christ and is traveling to lots of places telling the good news.

Philip is an interesting character. He is one of the original disciples called by Jesus. And he is a willing apostle – I actually feel like he’s a go-with-the-

flow kind of guy, willing to go wherever he is called, and doesn't really get too excited by any of it. Before the Spirit whisked him onto this "wilderness road," Philip was in Samaria, teaching about Jesus, healing and even baptizing in Christ's name. Recall friends, Samaritans and Jews were disapproving cousins, Philip was definitely NOT preaching to the choir. But he didn't seem to care – people seemed to be digging his message and finding their life in the resurrected Jesus, so...cool!

One quirk to the story of Philip baptizing the Samaritans is that because he did so only in the name of the Lord Jesus, it wasn't right. So, is Philip an Apostle-Lite? Peter and John, feeling the need to micromanage, traveled from Jerusalem to Samaria to "do it 'decently and in order'," and laid hands on the people so they could receive the Holy Spirit. (I wonder if those who were there the first time but not the second felt any less empowered?) 🙏

Actually, the Spirit didn't seem to care - it teleported Philip to that wilderness road where he encountered an Ethiopian (read non-Egyptian African) believer in YHWH, who was traveling home after attending high holy days in Jerusalem. Philip hears the man reading from the scroll of Isaiah, finds out the *person* is a eunuch (that is a gender minority), can tell the person is wealthy (he **is** riding in a chariot!), and finds none of these characteristics to be of any consequence. *{Friends, there is so much to talk about from this text...alas, not today.}*

All that matters to Philip is the question offered by his acquaintance:

“How can I understand what I am reading, unless someone guides me?”

Philip doesn't hesitate, the apostle climbs right up in that chariot and proclaims to the African eunuch the good news about Jesus. And after hearing this life-changing story, the person requests to be baptized in the name of the Christ (was the Holy Spirit in it?...dunno...but, we know the Spirit was present!). And, each goes on their merry way...seriously, Luke tells us that the eunuch went on the way rejoicing. And happy-go-lucky Philip was whisked by the Spirit moving towards the bustling, cosmopolitan port city of Caesarea, to meet up with lots more people who were unlike himself.

And there it is, friends, within this story we find the role of the Church:

Being present to (**and trusting**) the Holy Spirit, to put believers in the position of accompanying friends and strangers in order to connect the fulfillment of God's covenant through Jesus Christ to the reality of their lived existence.

In other words, we “boldly embrace a collaborative call to...spark a new vision of spirited hope.” (Get the play on words? Spirit-ed)

And we are able to “be so bold” because we are grounded in the grace of which Gene just spoke. Philip didn't just *boldly go where no apostle had gone before* in a vacuum. Please recall - he was one of those well-meaning disciples who got it all wrong from time to time, and even got it so wrong that he and his cohort left their teacher-mentor to be hung out to die.

Philip, whether by commission or omission, was in on the denial and betrayal. And yet, Christ loved him, and commissioned him with a whole bunch of other men and women, Samaritans and eunuchs—anyone humble enough to listen and orient their lives toward God—to go out and share the good news of God’s incredible promise of being able to create life. And this gift has been handed on to us, to share the good news, even in our driest and dustiest days.

{Prep the plastic}

And, my friends, this is good news to a tired, thirsty church. A church who isn’t sure what to say to a majority of society who don’t seem to care what we have to say. The good news is that the whole enchilada isn’t up to us. Do you think Philip woke up in Samaria with his mind on figuring out how he was going to lean into a eunuch from Africa to embrace the way of Jesus? No way! That was a 100% Spirit-fueled adventure.

{Grab the champagne bottle}

Ah, adventure. Is the Church ready for adventure?

{Agitate the bottle}

What I take from this story, is that for the Spirit to overflow, we have to be shaken up a bit; removed from our comfort zones.

{Twist the lid}

For the Spirit to bring us life, we need to let the constraints off...

{POP}

And we need to be prepared to go wherever Spirit sends us to go – even if it's messy; even if it feels out of our control...

{holding up the bottle}

For I sense that's what it takes to...**spark** a new vision of spirited hope.

As a reminder to you, there are bottles of sparkling apple cider in the foyer. You may do with it whatever you please: drink it today, save it for another day, keep it someplace as a bottled up reminder of potential waiting to be let loose. I'm sure I didn't get enough for everyone, so I would ask that for starters each household please take one, and if there are some left over after the reception you may take another one. Thanks!

*{put the bottle on the plastic,
put the cork on the altar, and
cover the bottle with foil}*