

**"From Grace to Grace: Lessons on the Journey"**  
**Rev. Jim Cunningham**  
**July 24, 2016**  
**Grace United Church of Christ**  
**Lancaster, Ohio**  
**During 200th Anniversary Year Celebration**  
**and Celebrating my 45th Ordination Anniversary**

**Preface**

*I preach from a detailed outline. This works better for me in a number of ways, but becomes problematic if there is no recording and I am asked for a copy of what I shared. Below is a text based on that outline. I may have left a few things out; I may have entered a few things not said! If any English teachers are reading this, please forgive me. Blessings!*

*Jim Cunningham*

**Readings**

**Hebrew Reading: I Samuel 16:7** (Common English Bible)

But the Lord said to Samuel, "Have no regard for his appearance or stature, because I haven't selected him. God doesn't look at things like humans do. Humans see only what is visible to the eyes, but the Lord sees into the heart."

**Gospel Reading: John 13:34-36** (New International Version)

"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

**Continuing Testament Reading:**

The Rev. Phillip Gulley is a Quaker pastor who wrote...

"I have known Christians whose vocabulary for judgment was rich and full, but their dialect for reconciliation and forgiveness, limited. They could easily summon the words for condemnation but fell mute when words of pardon were needed.

If the church valued reconciliation over judgment, it would have to surrender its fondness for black-and-white, either-or thinking.

[Speaking fondly about his congregation's generosity toward those in need, especially the homeless, he comments...]

As gracious as the people were, I was often frustrated by their seeming indifference when it came to church growth. On one occasion, frustrated that the congregation wasn't growing as quickly as I'd hoped, I asked Harriet why that was. "I guess it was never our goal to have a large church," she said. Our denomination spent considerable resources trying to attract new attendees to our congregations, so I was taken aback by Harriet's response, which contradicted our denominational priority. I was also young and energetic and harbored a not-so-secret desire to pastor a growing Quaker meeting. "Then why are we here?" I asked Harriet. "To love," she said, smiling.

[He goes on to note...]

In due time our membership grew, but I observed that our most joyful moments were those times when people extended healing to others. When numeric growth was our primary goal, we seemed to value only those persons who could contribute toward that aim—the financial donors, the families with children, the attractive, the gifted, the influential, and the capable. However, it took me a while to learn this, so while I was busily occupying myself with church growth, Harriet went cheerfully about the work of love—never excluding, never gauging the worth of people before caring for them, never judging another person, only working toward his or her wholeness and well-being. Her aptitude for reconciliation—of restoring persons to fullness of life without condemnation—was so appealing that everyone aspired to be like her.

Healthy, loving churches magnify a gesture of grace, transforming it into a mind-set and then a movement, expanding its power and presence. Unfortunately, decisions to judge and exclude can be equally contagious, sharing the same capacity for expansion. Churches that value reconciliation over judgment and acceptance over condemnation get that way by choosing wisely at key moments, never losing sight of their purpose—to bring wholeness to broken lives, immersing each person and situation in God's grace.

I would prefer a congregation of kind atheists over a congregation of hateful Christians.

While the church can be swiftly impulsive in its intolerance, it has often taken long years to act graciously. Fear and seriousness are almost always the enemies of grace. Fear seizes control and demands compliance. Grace

shares power and trusts others to make their own moral decisions. Fear is somber, stern, and uninspiring; grace is cheerful, joyful, and creative. Fear provides no room for error and is always in a hurry to have its way. Grace is expansive and gives us the time and space to learn and grow.

## **Introduction**

Wow! Grace Church celebrating 200 years! The Declaration of Independence was only 40 years old when the church was founded. I imagine there are not many, if any, congregations in Lancaster who can claim such a heritage. Congratulations!

This has been my "home church" for 71½ years!

And tomorrow, I celebrate the 45th anniversary of my ordination to Christian Ministry which took place right on this spot.

Thank you Grace Church for nurturing me in my faith journey that has led to so many blessings in my life! Thank you for inviting me to share in this year long 200th anniversary celebration and inviting me to share memories and lessons on the journey.

Greetings from Lakewood, Ohio where we reside and Cleveland the home of the NBA Champion Cleveland Cavaliers. And greeting from Amistad Chapel United Church of Christ, where we are members... a new church start located in the National UCC Offices in the center of downtown Cleveland.

## **Early Memories of Grace**

I have a vague memory of being 6 years old and standing with my brother & sister in the sanctuary on Chestnut Street being baptized by Rev. Harry Yaggi.

I remember my 2 year confirmation journey, meeting weekly and 3 week confirmation event...

Week one... being questioned in front of the congregation on matters of faith and the Heidelberg Catechism, a question/answer booklet we had to memorize.

Week two... being confirmed on Psalm Sunday.

Week three... taking first communion on Easter Sunday... all three weeks in white robes.

I remember, as some of you do, singing "Holy, Holy, Holy" as the opening hymn every Sunday from Trinity Sunday until Advent. Thank you for singing it one more time this morning!

So many wonderful and interesting memories of great times, great people - I will mention a few knowing I am leaving some out - the Hamburger family, the Davis family, Bill George, who I sang my first duet with in an Easter Cantata.

Great teachers and mentors like Al Henwood & Rev. Yaggi; Generous people who helped me finance my college and theological education like the Brown family and the congregation as a whole.

I remember preaching my first sermon as a junior in high school and president of the youth group. We always followed the National Council of Churches Youth Week theme & resources. That year the theme was... "Responsible Freedom: The Meaning of... Sex in a Christian Life." Since that day no subject has been too controversial for me to deal with in a sermon much to the angst of some who have had to listen to me!

The Claypools reminded me this morning of one sermon during College or Seminary on the Lord's Prayer, where I had arranged for my good friend, Jim Davis, to interrupt the congregation four times while trying to say the Lord's Prayer. Fortunately, the usher, who was requested by a member to escort Jim Davis out, had overheard us rehearsing the dialogue sermon the night before. I was pleased that Rev. Yaggi never asked me to submit my sermons in advance!

I have so many other memories, happy and sad, over all these years at Grace Church, some of which are noted in my printed bio in the bulletin.\*

### **Core Memory Experience of Grace**

The most important memory is one that formed the foundation of my call to ministry and shaped my life and ministry at its core.

I was not a normal child/teen in the 50's/60's... no comment Brother Bob!

Nerd? I was not athletic like my brother, nor social like my sister. I was introverted; I was not popular; I remember being bullied. I loved music, especially classical music (my brother to this day calls me "Leonard" - for my love of Leonard Bernstein and his Young People's Concerts I never missed on TV.) I loved current events, science, and politics.

I did not feel a great sense of community EXCEPT FOR... HERE IN GRACE CHURCH! All my life I have spoken of my young church experience as "AN OASIS OF COMMUNITY IN A FRACTURED WORLD." I felt "at home" here; I could be myself, unafraid, which is what everyone should feel in a faith community.

I call that "Grace!"

At the core of my ministry is my focus on providing for others "an oasis of community in a fractured world." ... not done perfectly... but a goal I strive for. It was also something I witnessed in my mother and father

### **My Ministry Career of Grace...**

I chose Lancaster Theological Seminary in Lancaster PA because it focused on "training people to be pastors of congregations"... and I wanted to duplicate my experience of a loving congregation at Grace in other places.

As God often does... God had something different in mind.

I did serve in a congregational pastoral role in two wonderful congregations. At the beginning of my career, I served as pastor of Farmersville United Church of Christ outside of Dayton Ohio - a wonderful congregation for a new pastor. They graciously put up with my novice mistakes, my unconventional creativity, and so much more. And, at the end of my career, I served as an Associate Pastor for Pastoral Care at the Bath Church United Church of Christ in Akron, Ohio.

My gifts and early experiences in ministry however, led me to a wider calling as a health care chaplain for the majority of my years in ministry. In hospitals, I sought to create "an oasis of community" for all people... people of no faith and all faiths... coping with pain, illness and injuries, grief, loss and death. As a hospital chaplain, I sought to bring a compassionate, sacred touch of grace into an often high tech, high stressed, and diseased focused setting.

Given the experience of the death of my newborn son, Chris, in Seminary and my first death at Farmersville being a 3 month old victim of Sudden Infant Death syndrome, I developed a special ministry focus in Perinatology, Neonatology, and Pediatrics, that is, high-risk obstetrics, critically ill newborns, and children. Out of this speciality, I was pleased to provide lectures and workshops around the country as well as the opportunity to write and publish in the field of newborn death and bereavement. I still lecture annually at Case Western University to Masters' students in Genetic Counseling on Newborn Death and Bereavement.

I also invested time into medical ethics. Creating an ethics committee to serve Fairview and Lutheran Hospitals and teaching in 4 medical residency programs. I really enjoy teaching residents and working along side doctors. One particular experience stands out for me. One day a very devout

Christian Romanian Orthodox Surgical Resident asked for my help. He had a common practice of praying with his patients before taking them to surgery. However, he sought my guidance when a Muslim patient, familiar with his practice of praying with patients, asked him to pray for him before his scheduled surgery the next day. It was a great conversation. Having read a recent article stating that a majority of patients would welcome their physician praying for them, I was invited to teach at a physician grand rounds on the subject of praying with patients - a complex issue!

Living with stress and surrounded by stress, I also, after much therapy and study, developed a major workshop about coping with stress. I have had the privilege of sharing this workshop with audiences large and small, lay and professional, in many states.

I was honored to receive from Lancaster Theological Seminary in 1991 their first annual Robert V. Moss Award for Excellence in Specialized Ministry.

In addition, I also continued my interest in bringing an "oasis of community" to those in society who suffered from injustice, and violence, and inequality through various social justice ministries.

### **Grace in My Personal Journey**

Let me move on from my career to say more about "Grace" for me personally and for my understanding of the church moving forward...

Grace has sustained my whole journey in all of its ups and downs... which has been quite a roller-coaster - and I hate roller coasters. I have been so blessed... not just for 71.5 years but for 13.8 billion years! From the beginning, billions of evolutionary changes occurred all of which led to my being able to be here sharing with you today. THAT IS A LOT OF BLESSINGS!

I have experienced so many resurrections in my life - this life - that I have concluded resurrection post-death will be anti-climatic.

Grace has seen me through...  
divorce,  
being fired,  
being laid-off,  
a cancer diagnosis  
a heart attack,  
through the death of a newborn child,

along with other significant deaths,  
family trials, triumphs, and disruption,  
economic crisis,...  
along with experiences of joys & blessings personally/professionally.

GRACE IS THE FOUNDATION UPON WHICH I STAND AND SURVIVE AND  
THRIVE!

THAT GRACE BEGAN... HERE AT GRACE CHURCH!

### **A Recent Personal Profound Experience of Grace**

I want to share a recent profound experience that has only deepened my  
experience of grace.

In 1994 I married my current spouse whose name at that time was  
Charlene. We connected at so many levels...  
both introverts...  
so many shared struggles...  
same sense of grace and spirituality...  
love of music and service to the church.

As our journey evolved so did Charlene's depression deepen. Nothing  
helped and we tried everything... No professional care giver found a  
treatment that really helped in any sustained way. I prayed so hard for  
healing for this one who suffered so much.

Early in 2012 Charlene shared that perhaps a group home was in order.  
While able to maintain a great home (grateful I was for this as a busy  
Chaplain), she was feeling a burden to me, living without the experience of  
any joy, unable to drive or play the piano or organ, or get out much.

Then on Feb. 26 everything changed.

Watching a TV talk show about transgender children Charlene turned to me  
and said... "That's me... I am a man trapped inside the body of a woman...  
my name is Charlie."

I could instantly tell the depression of so many years was lifted away! He  
could laugh, feel joy. The next day he could drive, play piano, sing, and  
wanted to go out and be with others. It was a sudden insight not the result  
of years of conscious struggling with gender identity - as it is for some.

But as we unpacked it and looked back on our journey and his early  
childhood journey, it all made sense.

Did I think about leaving him?... not for a second. I was so happy for him. The healing we had prayed for happened (though not as I imagined, I admit) but "Love is love is love is..." love is a gift of grace.

Have our lives changed? Yes and No.

We have continued our journey in committed marriage and love.

We continue to receive support from some.

Yes, we have also gained new support, and new friends.

Our health has improved!

But all this has not been without trials, family disruption, job loss, experiencing prejudice, intimidation, discrimination, and rejection.

I have been a longtime LGBTQ ally.

Half or more of my chaplaincy staff were LGBTQ, because health care is a safe place for LGBTQ clergy to do ministry. No one in the hospital community cares who you love or to whom you are married, unlike many congregations. My deeper involvement in this LGBTQ beloved community has been another blessing of grace.

We are blessed to have the opportunity to both offer to and receive grace from others in LGBTQ community. We have had an opportunity to change lives, educate others, and helped to achieve two major legislative victories to make Cleveland and Lakewood Ohio safer communities for LGBTQ people.

We are pleased that 15 cities in Ohio have afforded LGBTQ people equal rights and legal protection in employment, housing, and public accommodations. We are happy that everywhere in Ohio LGBTQ people can get married, but sad to know that the next day they may lose their job, be denied a mortgage, be evicted from their apartment and be denied other public services without any legal recourse just because of who they are and who they married. Lancaster is not one of the 15 cities with legislative protections for anyone who is LGBTQ.

Charlie please stand up... thank you for who you are and allowing me to share our story. I love you. You are such a blessing to me. I do not know if you have knowingly met a transgender person... if not, now you have!

Let me recall the Hebrew text, Mindy read earlier...

"But the Lord said to Samuel... 'Have no regard for his appearance or stature. God doesn't look at people like humans do. Humans see only what is visible to the eyes, but the Lord sees into the heart.'"



God grant us the grace to see as God sees!

## **My Thoughts about the Christian Church**

We need a new Reformation for the Church in our time!  
If the church does not change the church will die.

Every 400-500 years the Christian Church has gone through upheaval. In 325 Constantine made the Christian Church the Roman State religion and called the Council of Nicaea to unify a very diverse community of the followers of Jesus. In 1054 the Church split creating the Orthodox Christian Church and the Roman Catholic Church. In 1517 there was the Protestant Reformation. We are overdue for a new Reformation!

I see so many people leaving the church - not their faith, but the church because... they do not experience grace in the organized church, and/or they have to leave their brains at the door and not accept the truth of science and history. For too many people, their faith education never advanced beyond what they learned in confirmation. Up-to-date adult theological education is a critical need in the church.

Many people long for "an oasis of community in a fractured world," but they are not finding it in the church! People are having problems putting the teachings and behavior of Jesus with organizations who preach and demonstrate hate, prejudice, judgement, and condemnation.

Or, they find the organized church has been a silent enabler of hate by not addressing or confronting injustice.

Grace has taught me that churches should be no-hate zones! I am embarrassed by so much of what passes as the Christian church today. When I Am asked if I a Christian? I hesitate. I reply, "I am a follower of Jesus and I am not sure that is the same as being a Christian?!"

We are ALL children of one God, made in God's image, carrying God's DNA! This is what I experience in the grace of God. The Apostle Paul, in one of his brilliant moments (he was not always brilliant) said, NOTHING can separate us from the love of God." And, if he were here today, I am sure he would add... "and what part of NOTHING do you NOT understand! Jesus calls us to love as God loves.

Grace is: I love you, not if, but period!

The Gospel text read earlier is my favorite text.  
By this all people will know that you are my disciples if...

not, if you all agree,  
not, if you all recite the same creed,  
not, if you all attend the same church,  
not, if you understand the Bible literally,  
not, if you all profess the same faith,  
not, if you all like the same hymns,  
not, if you all like the same people or hate the same people,  
BUT, all people will know that you are my disciples if...  
you love one another!

Many folks just aren't seeing this among those who call themselves Christians in the organized church.

God so loved the... world... (John 3:16)  
not some of the world  
not some of the people,  
not some nations,  
not some faiths,  
not some races,  
not just one gender,  
not just the wealthy,  
not just heterosexuals,  
not just adults.

The Hebrew scriptures speak of loving God and loving our neighbors.

Jesus in the Gospels adds that we are to love our enemies.  
Someone listening to Hindu leader, Mahatma Gandhi, speaking about love and non-violence asked him, "What makes you different from the Christians?" He replied, "I believe Jesus really meant it when he said, 'Love your enemies!'"

There are also similar texts in the Quran, the Muslim sacred texts.  
[Yes there are terrible and violent texts in the Quran just as there are in Hebrew and Christian scriptures.] One text in the Quran I love describes how God created humanity in diversity... "so that we might get to know the 'other'" ...not shun them, disrespect them, hate them, but get to know them! Another text I love says, "to kill one innocent person is to kill all of humanity."

It is a very small fraction (about .2%) of those who call themselves Muslims who are killing innocent people as an act of faith, and the majority of those killed are other Muslims. From my point of view, they do not represent the teachings of Mohammed any more than Christians who kill in the name of

Christ (like at abortion clinics, etc.) represent the teachings of Jesus. I was deeply disturbed to see a number of videos of Christian preachers saying how pleased God was that 49 Gay and Lesbian people were shot and killed in Orlando recently. And, how much safer the community of Orlando was and how it was too bad more were not killed! I kid you not!

Jesus' mission and ours is to proclaim and live the Kingdom of God as though God was in charge, not Caesar, not any human leader. I love the line... "Jesus came proclaiming (in word/deed) the kingdom of God and what he got was... the church!" :-(

Jesus did not SIMPLY say all lives matter... He went out of his way to say to the privileged and powerful of his day... poor lives matter (Blessed are the poor), women's lives matter, "untouchable" lives matter, children's lives matter, eunuchs' lives matter, foreigners' lives matter, people of other faiths lives matter, peacemakers' lives matter... because he perceived that those lives mattered less to the Roman leaders and Jewish leaders of his day.

Jesus asked us to follow him... that is different than believing in him. Early followers of Jesus were called, "Followers of the Way" - the way of the Kingdom of God as taught by Jesus

Phillip Gully, the Quaker pastor who wrote this morning's Continuing Testament Reading and who is one of my favorite authors, wrote a book entitled: If the Church were Christian...

Here are a few of my favorite lines...

If the church were Christian, Jesus would be a model for living rather than an object of worship...

If the church were Christian, gracious behavior would be more important than right belief...

If the church were Christian, meeting needs would be more important than maintaining institutions.

If the church is to survive, we need a new Reformation!

### **A Message for Grace UCC Church**

I suspect Grace Church is the only or the most progressive and welcoming church in Lancaster? I have watched this congregation's evolution through the years. You are going in the right direction, I believe.

Be the Gospel!

Is it more important to be loving, or to be right?  
Is it more important to be faithful or to be a large congregation?  
I might argue the being large or popular means it is less likely that you are being faithful to the ways of Jesus.

I love the phrase you use here: "Grace happens!"

**Be the grace** you want from God!

**Be the grace** you experience in Jesus!

**Be the grace** in this community... welcoming everyone!

**Be the grace** - a no hate zone!

**Be the grace** where no one feels...  
dismissed, de-valued, disrespected, diminished, or discriminated against!

**Be the grace** that celebrates God's creative diversity!

**Be the grace** where any child, who feels like I felt as a child, would feel "at home" here - a place where no one is afraid to be themselves.

**Be the grace** where someone like my husband is embraced without question or hesitation!

**Be the grace** that stands up for equality and justice for all!

**Be the grace** that changes lives... and makes the world a better place!

**Be the grace** of Christ that sees the sacred in everyone... and what part of everyone do you not understand!

**Be the grace** that creates "an oasis of community in a fractured world!"

**Thank you!**

Thank you... for being grace to me. This congregation has truly blessed me!  
I am deeply, profoundly, and eternally grateful.

Happy Anniversary! May God continue to shine upon you and from you.  
Amen.

\*Biography printed in the bulletin at Grace UCC:

**Rev. Jim Cunningham -**

Born in Lancaster, Ohio 4/23/45

Son of Gail and Mary Cunningham (deceased, Members at Grace)

Sister: Susan (John) Rogers (deceased, Members at Grace)

Brother: Bob (Melodye) Cunningham (Members at Grace)

Married to my current spouse, Charlie, 1994

5 children, 6 grandchildren (blended family)

**Education:**

South Elementary School, Lancaster, OH

Thomas Ewing Junior High School, Lancaster, OH

Lancaster High School (class of 1963), Lancaster, OH

Heidelberg University, Tiffin OH, (class of 1968)

Lancaster Theological Seminary, Lancaster, PA (class of 1971)

Clinical Pastoral Education Residency at Lutheran General Hospital,  
Park Ridge, IL (1976-77)

**Major career positions:**

Pastor, Farmersville United Church of Christ (near Dayton, OH)

Assistant Director of Pastoral Care, The Toledo Hospital, Toledo, OH

Director of Pastoral Care, Fairview & Lutheran Hospitals, Cleveland, OH

Associate Pastor, Bath United Church of Christ, Akron, OH

Retired December 31, 2009

**Significant dates for me at Grace United Church of Christ**

Baptized: July 8, 1951 along with my sister, Susan, & brother, Bob

Confirmed: March 22, 1959

Preached my first sermon, Fall 1962

Married Marilyn Bell at Grace Church in 1967

Buried Son, Christopher July 6, 1969

Ordained: July 25, 1971

Buried Mom: February 8, 1980

Buried Dad: March 14, 1998

Buried nephew, Brian: April 30, 2008

Buried Sister, Susan: May 30, 2012

Preaching July 24, 2016 during the 200th Anniversary of Grace Church