

Grounded in Connection: The Life We Share

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Last week, Pastor Sarah reminded us that our faith is not a subject to be learned or mastered, but a way to live our lives. After worship, we had our first confirmation class downstairs in Welsh Hall with most of our twelve confirmands and their mentors. We started off our time together playing a game called forced choice. I give a choice, and you have to go to one side of the room or the other. Pineapple belongs on pizza. Pineapple doesn't belong on pizza. That kind of thing.

One of the choices I gave the group was this: God is more interested in how we treat people than in what we believe. Or: God is more interested in what we believe than how we treat people.

There were grumbles. Nobody wanted to pick a side. But of course, the point of a game called forced choice, is to ignore nuance so I persisted in trying to make them choose. One confirmand pointed out that how you treat people is an outgrowth of what you believe — you act based on what you hold to be true. Another pointed out that we all know people who say they believe one thing and live another. I pointed out that sometimes those people might even be us. By the end, the room landed in the same place: both things matter, and they're tangled up in each other in a way that's hard to pull apart.

Because here's the thing — you don't have to be a Christian to treat people well. Most religions teach some version of the golden rule. Plenty of people with no religion at all hold a clear moral compass. And calling yourself a Christian doesn't mean you don't also go home and treat others terribly. Historically there's plenty of examples like: slaveholders who sat in church pews every Sunday; but, Christians today have plenty of their own chances to hear Jesus' teachings and do the opposite. Belief, on its own, isn't a guarantee of anything.

In comes this little passage from 1 Peter.

This letter was written to the very first Christian communities — people who were ostracized, disowned by their own families, and in real physical danger for claiming the name of Christ. And still, thousands of people found the story of Jesus compelling enough to build their whole lives around it despite the exile and danger involved.

We, here in the United States, are pretty far from that. Most of us are Christian because we were born into Christian families and we live in a country where Christianity is the dominant faith. No martyrs here.

But here's what we still have in common with them: choosing to follow Jesus is supposed to change something about our lives. It's supposed to set us apart — not just in what we say we believe, but in how we actually live.

The early Christians made their neighbors suspicious and uncomfortable — especially the way they shared their wealth and resources with each other, breaking down the social and economic lines everyone else took for granted. The author of 1 Peter was coaching these small, watched communities on how to live in a way that would, as one scholar put it, put the ugly rumors about them to rest — and maybe even earn the curiosity of the people watching them.

There are four small verses of that instruction in chapter four that we read today that I love, and I think they are just as relevant to us today if we are trying to live a life that sets us apart as followers of Jesus.

First it says: "The end of all things is near. Therefore be alert and of sober mind so that you may pray."

Now picture the moment your head is least clear — the diagnosis, the phone call you didn't expect, 2 a.m. with your mind racing. That's exactly the moment Peter is talking about. Not "pray when it's easy." Pray when everything in you wants to spiral. Keep your head enough to remember God is still there. Remember how often the bible gives the same piece of advice - "do not be afraid" — not because fear isn't real, but because fear doesn't get the last word. No matter what's happening, it's not the end of the story. Even at the very end of everything we know, it is not the end of God.

That's the first thing that sets us apart - that we can turn to God no matter what is happening.

Then: "Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins."

We know this one in our bones. It's easy to write off a stranger. It's much harder to write off someone you love — you find your way back to forgiveness for the people closest to you far more readily than for people you barely know. Peter isn't asking for warm feelings. He's asking us to practice treating everyone — the stranger, the difficult coworker, the person who wronged us — the way we'd treat someone we already love. Every interaction, every day, meet people with love first.

That's the second thing that sets us apart - the decision to encounter people with love.

Then: "Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling."

How often do we complain about what it costs to be in relationship with people — the effort, the inconvenience, the mess? Back then, this literally meant opening your home to traveling strangers and sharing whatever you had. We don't do that as often today, but the heart of it still applies: give freely, without keeping score of who owes you. Don't get so wrapped up in making things perfect that you resent the whole effort. Be the kind of host who makes someone feel welcome even if they show up late, empty-handed, without a thank-you gift. Make that your basic posture toward people — open, unguarded, generous. This is connection at its most basic: a door left open, a life shared with whoever walks through it.

That's the third thing that sets us apart - integrating hospitality in everything we do.

And finally: "Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others, as faithful stewards of God's grace."

This one is the most countercultural of all, if we take it seriously.

My husband Brian teaches an Introduction to Religion at Carthage, and recently his class was studying Native traditions. Among some Native nations, there was a custom called the potlatch — a gathering where those with more resources gave much of it away to those with less, redistributing wealth and belongings as a matter of practice, not charity. The U.S. and Canadian governments actually banned these gatherings for decades — officially as a tool of forced assimilation, but also, not coincidentally, because it doesn't fit in a capitalist model and challenges the social class lines. The early Christians provoked a similar discomfort in their time. Holding things in common, refusing to let wealth mark out who mattered — it broke rules people depended on. Both traditions understood something we're trying to relearn this and every stewardship season: that we are grounded not by what we keep, but by what we share.

We can read "use whatever gift you have received" as meaning only spiritual gifts — teaching, encouragement, leadership. And yes, we should share those. But the early church heard this verse as something bigger: share what you actually have. All of it.

We live in a culture that trains us to hoard. Store up. Protect what's yours. And there's real fear underneath that instinct — we've all seen what happens to people who don't have enough, and none of us wants to end up there. That fear is not irrational. But instead of building a world where fewer people fall through the cracks, we mostly just try to build a bigger cushion for ourselves. We can have a very satisfying conversation about the billionaire who could end world hunger and doesn't and how it isn't right for anyone to have that much money. And we'd be right. But if we are honest, if we take

what 1 Peter is trying to tell us seriously then we should know that this is true at the scale of billionaires, but it's also true on a much smaller scale, of us — sitting in these pews this morning.

That's the fourth thing that sets us apart - to be willing to share what we have - all of what we have - with others.

Every year we have a season we mark for stewardship. Partly that's just practical — the church has a budget, and budgets require planning. But that's not really why we do this. We do it because this is one place we're asked to hold our beliefs and our actions up next to each other and look honestly at the gap between them. Where are we actually giving freely? Where are we quietly hoarding?

This year our theme is Grounded in Connection: The Life We Share — and I don't think that's just a slogan on a pledge card. It names exactly what 1 Peter is describing: a people held together not by shared opinions, but by a shared life, poured out for one another.

Here's what strikes me about this verse: Peter doesn't call us stewards of our own money. He calls us stewards of God's grace — grace we were handed long before we did anything to deserve it, grace we didn't earn our way into by being careful or by saving enough. None of us arrived in this room, this morning, in this faith, purely by our own effort. We've certainly worked for things along the way. But what we've earned is small next to what we've simply been given.

So when you're asked in this season to give to this particular place — your money, your time, whatever gift is actually yours to give — you're not being asked to lose something you built alone. You're being asked to pass along something you were only ever holding for a little while. That's what it means to be grounded in connection: knowing that what you have was never only yours, and that the life we share is bigger than the life any one of us holds alone. That's not loss. That's just telling the truth about where it came from.

So — back to that forced choice game with our confirmands. Belief or behavior: which one does God actually care about?

I still think it's not a fair question. There's no clean line between the two. If our beliefs are real, they don't stay in our heads — they show up in a clear mind that turns to prayer, in love that forgives before it's asked to, in a door that stays open, in hands that let go of what they've been gripping. And if our actions put us in close proximity to care for others, our beliefs will change through those experiences.

So I invite leave here today thinking about how your life looks different because you call yourself a Christian and then think about how you can practice that this week — even if it's something small. Call the person you've been meaning to forgive. Invite the neighbor you've never invited in. Give away the thing you've been holding onto a little too tightly. Fill out the pledge card after considering what a meaningful gift for you really means.

Stewardship season isn't about the number on your pledge card. It's about whether your beliefs are becoming your actions, and your actions are becoming your beliefs — grounded, together, in the life we share.