

“In Our Hands”

Good Morning, everyone!

It is always such a gift to worship with the Saints at Grace, and it is especially fun to be with you on a weekend that is all about **vision**. Today we celebrate the Transfiguration of Jesus—that incredible vision that three of the disciples experienced on a mountain top. But today we also celebrate another vision of transfiguration that the Holy Spirit has created among you. It is a vision of transfiguring Grace—of **reconfiguring, renovating and renewing** your beautiful church home, so that it can be a more effective tool for helping you live out your mission ***to make Christ known in the world—to continue to be a faithful growing servant on this corner***. Five weeks from today will be Commitment Weekend, when you will all have the opportunity to commit your financial support to making this vision a reality.

The scripture passage from the gospel of John that your leaders chose as the foundation for our Capital Campaign is one of my favorite passages in all of scripture: *“From Christ’s fullness we have all received grace upon grace.”* We have all received this grace...even if we didn’t ask for it, even if we don’t realize it. Like a fish lives in water, we live in God’s grace.

It reminds me of a story you may have heard about an older couple from Pennsylvania driving down to Florida for the first time. On their second day of traveling, they stopped for breakfast in a country restaurant in rural South Carolina. The husband ordered eggs, sausage, and toast. When his plate arrived, he noticed a pile of gray white lumpy stuff. "What's this?" he asked the waitress. "Why sir, them is grits." But I didn't order them," he protested. "Oh," the waitress responded, "you don't order grits. Grits just comes!"

We don't order grace. It just comes - like a rainbow in the sky, like the light of dawn in the night, like a vision in the hearts of God’s people. Grace just keeps on coming ...generation after generation.

Today, I’d like to focus our thoughts on this vision that God has planted in your hearts: **Growing in Grace...Generation to Generation**. So, I brought something to show you. I thought we’d have an object lesson. I know this looks like an ordinary strand of pearls to you. But, these pearls tell a story—a love story. It’s a love story that makes these pearls very precious to me and my family.

During WWII, my father purchased these pearls in Okinawa. My father was only 19 years old at the time, but he had a vision, and it gave him hope.

In his vision, the war would end soon.

He would survive the war, and when he returned home, a certain young lady named Lucille would be waiting for him.

She would accept his proposal of marriage, and she would wear these pearls on their wedding day.

My father's vision came to fruition. But, what my father did not envision when he purchased these pearls, was that 70 years later his grand-daughters would wear these pearls on *their* wedding days, because their grandparents had given them a vision of love. And these pearls became a way of remembering and honoring the love their grandparents had shared not only with each other, but with each of their grandchildren.

Being the eldest child, I am now the keeper of the pearls, but at some point in the future, I will be passing these pearls on to my eldest daughter, entrusting her to care for them and to carry their love story to the next generation.

This church is a lot like this strand of pearls. For anyone driving by, Grace Lutheran Church is simply another beautiful, historic church building. But this church has a story to tell—a love story—a love story that makes this church very precious to each of you. Not only is it a story of the love and commitment of six generations who have kept the light of Christ shining in and through this congregation for nearly 150 years. This church is also the bearer of the greatest love story ever written. “For God so **loved** the world that he sent his only son.”

You are now the keepers of this church. But in the not too distant future, you will be passing this church and God's love story on to the next generation. The task before all of us today is to ensure that what we are doing *now* will equip the next generation to be the keepers of God's church and to carry God's love story to generations that are yet unborn.

Now, I must admit that I have a vested interest in the outcome of your transfiguration project. You see, I love God's church. Like many of you, I was raised in the church. My faith was nurtured, supported and shaped by countless, precious church people. The deepest friendships and the most meaningful experiences of my life have come to me through the church. The church has been there to rejoice with me in the happiest moments of my life, to guide me through the difficult times, and to comfort me as I have grieved the death of those dearest to me. I am who I am today because of the church.

But this church that we love is slowly becoming an endangered species in America. We've seen the statistics showing the decline in our mainline denominations. We've read the stories of church closures. This church that we love is finding it difficult to connect with younger generations, struggling to draw them into the community of faith that has been so life-giving and life-transfiguring for us.

Last year I attended a seminar at which the brilliant theologian and writer, The Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor, was the keynote speaker. She shared a very

sobering story. Several years ago she was hiking with a group of people in southern Turkey. They turned a bend in the path and there, looming in front of them, was the outline of a ruined Christian cathedral. The façade was crumbling. When she went inside this once magnificent church, she discovered that it was **filled with litter and weeds were growing up** between the mosaic tiles of the floor. In the faded and cracked frescoes there were still recognizable fragments of the Lamb of God, the last supper and figures of saints and prophets. In summarizing this experience, Dr. Taylor said: **“Talking about the post-Christian era is a very different thing than actually walking around in it. Christianity died in Turkey. The land that gave birth to Paul. The land of Galatia, Ephesus and Collossia. We simply cannot take our church or our faith fore granted. We must bring all our best gifts to the work of strengthening the church and passing on our faith, or we may end up selling tickets to museums.”**

This is what the Capital Campaign is all about. It is about bringing **all our best gifts to the work** of strengthening this church and passing on our faith to future generations. It’s about harnessing the power of our money and putting it to work for God.

It never ceases to amaze me that God has entrusted us with the message of his love. God is depending on us to tell the story of God’s love. For better and worse, God has placed his message in our hands. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “And so we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.” There is no Plan B. The future of the church is up to us. God cannot preserve the church without our help. Sometimes I think we forget how much God needs people to accomplish his purposes.

You have probably heard the joke about the pastor who was visiting one of his parishioners—a man who had bought an old, dilapidated farm and had spent years restoring the farm to its former glory. After the farmer had given the pastor a tour of the farm, the pastor said, “God has certainly blessed you with a beautiful farm.” And the farmer replied, “You should have seen this place when God had it all to himself!”

Or listen to these words of Antonio Stradivari, the great maker of violins: “When any musician holds between their chin and hand a violin of mine, they will be glad that Stradivari lived, made violins and made them of the best woods. For while God gives the musicians skill, I give them instruments to play upon. God has chosen me to help him create music. If my hand slacked, I should rob God of the violins he needs—leaving a blank instead of violins. God could not make Stradivarius violins without Antonio.”

We are God’s people in this time and place. This is our watch. God believes in us. God is depending on us. We don’t want to look back over our lives, and

realize that we left a *blank*—where God had gifted us to create a thriving, vibrant, life-giving, life-transforming church on the corner of Queen and James.

Dr. Paul Brand, the noted leprosy specialist, tells a powerful story in his book Fearfully and Wonderfully Made. After WWII a group of German students volunteered to help rebuild a cathedral in England that had been a casualty of bombings. As the work progressed, debate broke out on how best to restore a large statue of Jesus with his arms outstretched and bearing the familiar inscription: “**Come Unto Me.**” Careful patching could repair all the damage to the statue except for Christ's hands, which had been totally destroyed. Finally the parishioners and the young students reached a decision that still stands today. The statue of Jesus has no hands, but the inscription now reads: “**Christ Has No Hands But Ours.**”

God loves the world **through** us. We are the ones who know God's love story and have experienced God's love. God is depending on us to share this story, not only through the work of our churches, but through our individual interactions with people. **The message of God's love is in our hands.** We are the ones who are called to tell to the coming generations about this loving God who has blessed us with grace upon grace.

Remember the words of that old gospel song, “He's got the whole world in his hands?” It's true. God does have the whole world in His hands. But God has placed the *care* of His world in **our** hands.

The precious gift of God's creation—It's in our hands.

The message of salvation—of God's love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ—it's in our hands.

And the future of the church—that's in our hands, too.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, may God bless the work of our hands, so that 70 years from now, *pearls of faith* will adorn the lives of the grand children of this congregation and all those who come after them. May God's faithfulness enable us to faithfully pass on the story of God's great love—this pearl of great price--that has been placed in *our* hands. Amen.