

Grace and Gratitude
Sunrise Presbyterian Church
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Christ the King Sunday
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"The Kingdom of God," Frederick Buechner once wrote, "is so close we can almost reach out our hands and touch it." He continues, "Time after time Jesus tries to drum into our heads what he means by it. He heaps parable upon parable like a madman. He tries shouting it. He tries whispering it. The Kingdom of God is like a treasure, like a pearl, like a seed buried in the ground. It is like a great feast that everybody is invited to and nobody wants to attend. What he seems to be saying is that the Kingdom of God is the time, or a time beyond time, when it will no longer be humans in their lunacy who are in charge of the world but God in his mercy who will be in charge of the world. It's the time above all else for wild rejoicing—like getting out of jail, like being cured of cancer, like finally, at long last, coming home. And it is at hand, Jesus says."ⁱⁱ

Yet it is difficult to see God's Kingdom this week in the aftermath of the Paris shootings and bombings. We hear rumors of war - congressional action to keep refugees away - condemnations of Islam - none of which are stuff Jesus tells us of God's Kingdom. When there is so much despair and fear, it's hard to hold sight of the vision of God's Kingdom. If we can't keep the vision in our mind's eye - then how are we to think about our role in the Kingdom of God?

Over the past few weeks I've had a story about the unfolding of the Kingdom in my life. It's a tale of God's great grace and my tremendous gratitude. In the spirit of offering thanks next Thursday - I offer it to you.

I know I have often told you that I grew up in South Carolina. I have also said that I have grown to abhor the racist system which framed my life there, and I have recalled the sad fact that I did not realize the evil of segregation until I was in my late teens. Moreover, I've pondered why my Presbyterian church did not teach me about God's love for all people, and I've often questioned why the ministers of the congregation and the session continued to support segregation. But now that I read the history of sixties I realize that there was much more racial strife and unrest in the state than I had ever fathomed. Although I read the newspaper every day, I did not read about it - nor do I recall it being reported. These are retrospect musings of an adult.

Now, I was born at my grandmother's house in Marion, South Carolina. Since my father was in Formosa serving as an advisor to Chiang Kai-shek, my mother and

sisters were living were living with my grandmother in Marion. She was Baptist - in fact, she was the superintendent of the Sunday School - so our Presbyterian family went to the Baptist church with her. However, following my birth, my father wrote my mother to take me to the Presbyterian Church, so I was baptized there. It's strange that we did not go to his home church just 20 miles away. Instead, my mother took me to the First Presbyterian Church of Marion - where she had few connections - to be baptized. My family has told me the tale of how they all trooped in and sat on the pew together - watched my baptism -- then promptly marched out in the middle of the service and headed to the beach for a picnic. It remains a hilarious family story. The pastor's name was John Lyles. I still have the letter he wrote my father and my father's reply, and I thought that is where it ended.

But I continually underestimate God's grace - which adds another chapter to this story. To wit: a few weeks ago, I attended a gathering of colleagues and friends at Mo Ranch in Texas. Tom Currie, one of my professors at Austin Seminary who had just retired as founding Dean of Union Theological Seminary in Charlotte, North Carolina, led the group sessions. While we were sharing our stories, I reminded Tom of my connection to South Carolina. I mentioned, in particular, how sad I remain that I did not experience ministers open to welcoming Black people to worship.

Tom said, "Well let me tell you about John Lyles, who was fired in Marion for suggesting that they might integrate."

"What," I answered, catching my breath, "I'm pretty sure that John Lyles baptized me." When I returned home, I learned that was indeed the truth.

John Lyles was called to First Presbyterian Church in Marion, in the fall of 1955. He baptized me on April 8 (the Sunday after Easter and 11 years to the day after Dietrich Bonhoeffer was hung - important dates to me) During this time the decision of the U.S. Supreme Court - Brown vs. Board of Education - began to have impact in the state. In particular, the decision which arose from a case in Topeka established that the current school system of "separate but equal schools" for blacks and whites was unconstitutional -- a decision that caused havoc and anxiety. Seeking to offer voice of moderation and reason into the discourse, Lyles and four of his colleagues composed a booklet, *South Carolinians Speak*. The prospectus for the pamphlet read, "We desperately need the leadership of men and women who will debate the issues rationally, who will counter the voices of extremism with words of moderation, and who still have the humility and courage to see a goal in the future towards which we must be working . . ." ⁱⁱ

Governor Timmerman got a copy of the pamphlet and leaked its contents to the press. It became front page news even though it was yet to be printed. The good people at First Presbyterian had a session meeting - Lyles was out of town - and decided that such an attitude "disrupted the leadership of the church at Marion and jeopardized his position as pastor. At the next session meeting when Lyles was back in town, it was agreed that he would seek another pastorate."ⁱⁱⁱ In the meantime, the Little Rock school crisis erupted in Arkansas. Lyles announced a two sermon series concerning race relations. He preached one of the two sermons. And that was enough for the congregation. They asked him not to preach the second one - he concurred. Lyles then went on to fruitful and commendable ministry in the Presbyterian Church, USA.

Tom sent me a copy of the sermon this week. Using Amos as a text, Lyles carefully built a case that forced segregation is not Biblical. Lyles wrote, "There is no biblical support for enforced racial segregation. There is no support for it in the Standards of the Presbyterian Church There is no support in the history of the church universal."^{iv} And he proceeded to develop that theme into a sermon.

I am moved beyond words by the courage of the man who baptized me. I am humbled by his persistence and bravery in the face dire financial consequences for his preaching. I am insanely proud to know that it was his hand which carried the waters of grace to my head, giving me the blessing which had been given him long ago.

I sometimes forget full measure of the grace we offer in our ministry. We pray, we preach, we baptize, we care, we teach -- and we simply offer those means of grace and trust with faith that they will bring great blessing in due time. Now and then we see the fruit of our ministry. More often, regrettably, we never know.

I learned this week that I already had something for which I had desperately longed. I just did not know. I just did not expect the wonderful irony of grace to weave its way into my story. When we stop expecting grace - we stop looking for it.

I feel profoundly blessed to have learned this story. It brings me deep joy and tremendous gratitude. It reminds me over again of the importance and the grace of the hands we place on our children's heads - of the prayers we offer them - the conversations we have with them. I pray for the courage and bravery of John Lyles that I might have the boldness to help this congregation speak to difficult and contentious issues. In the wake of the Paris bombings - in the shadow of ever increasing violence in our own country - in the hope of understanding who we are as a diverse country - with rumors of war and violence spreading in our

world, let us remember the words of Jesus and make sure we speak of them to our children - and our adults - and ourselves.

Jesus' words of love and grace are the greatest gift we have. As we offer thanks Thursday for families, friends, remembrances, pets, tomatoes, flowers and the World Series pennant - let us in particular, offer gratitude to the one who calls us to be at work in God's Kingdom - let us offer our Christ all praise and glory. Alleluia! Amen.

ⁱ <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/content/kingdom-god-1>

ⁱⁱ John Lyles in *The Unsilent South*, Donald Shriver, 22.

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

^{iv} Ibid. 24