

“Live Like Fred”

2 Corinthians 8:1-15

Series: Share Week 5 Share Grace

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I drink it black. No cream. Never sugar. The darker the better: French Roast, Sumatra, Kenya coffee. Presbyterians *like* to eat, but we *love* coffee. We have three sacraments: Baptism, Communion, and Coffee and Donuts. I think John Calvin said that.

At one church meeting, however, my craving for Java landed me in a dangerous brew. During the lunch break, I heard a lady cry for help. A black stream of coffee poured out of the polished silver urn into her Styrofoam cup. But it didn't stop. The spigot was stuck open. A fountain of steaming fluid kept flowing. Her cup kept filling. Soon the boiling brew would wash over the sides and burn her hand. “Here, let me help you,” I said jumping into the fray with an empty cup. “Oh thank you,” she sighed with relief. When that cup filled, I grabbed another. “Hold this,” I offered it to my new friend. But when I looked up from the urn, I discovered she was sitting down enjoying her Java. She deserted me. I was all alone. Now it was just me against the urn.

Quickly I formed a Styrofoam bucket brigade. “Would you like a cup of coffee?” “Have one on the house.” “Can I top that off for you?” “How about a warm up?” I kept passing and it kept pouring. Now I know that when the 23rd Psalm says, “My cup runneth over,” David meant coffee.

“Flow” is essential. If the water doesn't flow into *and* out of your house, you have a major plumbing problem. If electricity doesn't flow because the power is out, if data doesn't flow because the Wi-Fi is down, it's a catastrophe. If your blood flow is blocked you have a heart attack or stroke. If your cash flow stops you go bankrupt.

Today I want to talk about another kind of Flow. We say people are GraceFUL—full of grace. But it's more important to be GraceFLOW. God doesn't want you to just fill up with His grace, to hold and hoard His blessings. His Grace is supposed to flow through you to others. What is Grace? It's a gift, a free gift. God blesses you with gifts of life and breath, power and peace, work and rest, abundant life and eternal life. He blesses you so you will bless others. He wants His Grace to flow through you to others.

One Woodside saint who shared Grace is Fred Rapell. He was always giving. A life-long executive of Kodak, Fred loved to take pictures and give them to you (on paper of course, Fred was not big with computers). Fred served and defended our nation as a sailor in World War II. He was devoted to his family and lovingly cared for his wife Dot to the day she passed away in 2004. He loved to bake. At his 90th birthday everyone went home with a pound cake lovingly made by Fred. He was always willing to lend a hand here at Woodside. Fred let God's grace flow through him. People of all ages – children to seniors – considered him their friend. He radiated grace. Fred enjoyed inviting friends out to breakfast – including me. And I know he loved coffee just as much as me.

What if we all lived like Fred? What if we let the Grace Flow from God, through us, to others? The Corinthians could learn a lesson from Fred. Like all humans, they are a selfish, prideful, cantankerous bunch. They argue with each other. They insult the Apostle Paul who started the church. In time, they clean up their act, ask Paul's forgiveness, and clear away all the obstacles ... except one. A year before, they promised to give money to support their struggling brothers and sisters in the Jerusalem church (1 Corinthians 16:1-4, 2 Corinthians 8:10-12). But the offering was never sent. We don't know the exact reason. Maybe some complained about sending money to strangers. "Charity should begin at home." Perhaps others said, "Times are tough, the economy is bad, taxes are high." Some may have wondered if the money was going to the right people and others may have said they already gave their fair share, more than others. Whatever the reason, the giving was blocked. The grace didn't flow.

Paul does not criticize the Corinthians. Instead, he reconnects them with the source of Grace. He tells them to **Tap into Grace**.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that through his poverty you might become rich. 2 Corinthians 8:9

Take all the wealthiest people in history – John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, J. P. Morgan, Bill Gates, Warren Buffet, Elon Musk - add up their total worth and it would not be a penny in a piggy bank compared to the riches of the King of kings and Lord of lords. Imagine what Jesus, the Creator of heaven and earth, gave up to come down here to this tiny planet, to be born in a smelly stable, to live without a penny to His name, a cloak on His back or a pillow for His head. Imagine what it was like for the Eternal, Everlasting, Almighty God to suffer and die on a Roman stake. He didn't give 2% or 10% or even 90%. He gave His all. He gave it all for you.

Years ago Bishop Booth was the Episcopal bishop of Vermont. He led a Christ-like life. After he passed, the nurse at his deathbed made a shocking comment, "I know where the bishop is tonight. His soul is in hell." Everyone who heard this was absolutely stunned into silence. The nurse went on, "that's the only place the bishop would be happy – where there are people who need help, who need Jesus."¹

Jesus went to hell and back for you. He did that so you can be rich in grace, faith, hope and love. He went to hell for you because He did not want to go to heaven without you. He saved you by grace. Salvation is a free gift of grace. If you are looking for a reason to give, don't look at your bank account, stock portfolio or what's in your wallet. Look first at Jesus who became poor so you can be eternally rich. Tap into His Grace.

Second, **Clear a Channel for Grace**. Paul gives the Corinthians an example of GraceFlow. He tells them about the Macedonians – the Christians living up in Thessalonica, Berea and Philippi.

And now, brothers and sisters, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. In the midst of a very severe trial, their

¹ Bruce Thielemann, "Telltale Tears," Preaching Today, Tape No. 40.

overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. 2 Corinthians 8:1-2

The Macedonians were dirt poor. When it came to money, their well was nearly dry. What's more, they were persecuted for their faith in Jesus. Yet out of those tiny, destitute congregations gushed a geyser of overflowing joy and rich generosity. How did they do it? Paul said they did something completely unexpected.

They cleared away the obstacles. God's river of grace and joy is waiting to flow through you and me. Yet we need to remove the rocks that block the flow. First the Macedonians opened a channel to God. Paul writes, "They gave themselves first to the Lord" (2 Corinthians 8:5). Before you and I give away anything, we must first give ourselves to the Lord Jesus Christ. We declare Him the Creator and Owner of all we are and all we have. We belong to Him. When you give, you are actually giving back to the Lord what belongs to Him.

Years ago, when my kids were in elementary school, the school had a "Christmas Secret Shop." Kids bought gifts for Mom and Dad. On Christmas morning they were more excited for Lisa and me to open our gifts, than opening theirs. Now where did they get the money for those gifts? From my wallet. Technically speaking, I paid for my own gift. They gave me back what was mine. And yet, the joy in their faces and the love invested in those gifts made them far more precious to me than their price tag.

When you give from your income to the Lord, you are really giving back to Him a portion of all He gave you. He could demand you to give it all back. Yet it brings God more joy to see the generosity and love you invest in your gift. First give yourself to Jesus. Remove the obstacles and let His grace and joy flow into you.

Open the Faucet of Grace After giving themselves to the Lord, the Macedonians gave themselves to others. They supported Paul and his missionary team (see Philippians 4:10-20). They sent a large gift to the struggling Christians in Jerusalem. They even loved their neighbors who treated them badly. God's grace and gifts must flow through you to others. Don't let them back up in you. I love coffee. But when my coffee cup runneth over, there's only one thing to do: give it away. I can't drink all that Java myself nor do I want to waste it. So I share it. Water that backs up starts to stink. God's gifts and grace, need to flow through us to others.

The Macedonians "gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us *in keeping with God's will*" (2 Corinth. 8:5). They gave according to God's will. What are the Lord's instructions for giving?

Give Proportionately – these poor Christians "gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability" (2 Corinthians 8:3). Not all could give the same amount. But all could give the same proportion. They gave a tithe or a tenth of all they had to their church family and then, amazingly, went beyond the tithe and gave more. That means if you make \$100 you keep \$90 for your family needs and to pay your taxes and give \$10 to the Lord. My wife and I practice tithing and we've been able to care for our family, pay

our taxes and save. I encourage you to join us and tithe. If you are not there yet then start by giving a percent of your income – 1, 2, 5% and work your way up to tithing.

Give Willingly – “Entirely on their own, they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints” (2 Corinthians 8:3-4). No one had to twist their arm. They were so filled with the grace and joy of the Lord it poured out of them. They had to share.

Give Joyfully – “Each one should give what he has decided in his own heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7). The Greek word that Paul uses for “cheerful” is “hilarious.” The Christians in Lusaka Zambia are very poor compared to us. Yet when we worshiped with them on Sunday there was great joy and singing – especially during the offering – and they had four offerings!

Woodside you have given them another reason to sing for joy. You raised funds to put a new roof over their classrooms, and new floors under their children’s feet. You walked and raised funds so that water can flow freely. The Rev. Sevatt Kabaghe, the General Secretary of the Presbyterian Church in Zambia writes,

Thank you so much for the love you have for us. I am so happy that you keep on praying for the church here. Despite your own challenges, you have kindly helped us in one way or the other. This is a blessing that I will always treasure and will value it all the time.

Yet this is not all you do. This year you gave funds and framed the walls for three Habitat for Humanity houses. You gave money to support refugees from the war in Ukraine, victims of the devastating earthquake in Turkey and Syria, sufferers who lost everything in the fires in Maui. You housed the homeless through Code Blue, fed the hungry through the Dinner Ministry, bought 54 gifts cards to provide Thanksgiving dinner for Trenton families through Urban Promise, offered hope and healing to those incarcerated and in recovery, built a school in the Dominican Republic, gave 11% of the church’s budget to missions in addition to offering worship services, children’s ministries, youth group events, growth groups, deacon and REACH ministries and so much more. My coach Dr. Bob Logan, who consults with churches across America and around the world, said to me this week, “Your church is so generous, we need to find out why and clone it.” Woodside, let’s not just pat ourselves on the back. There’s so much need. The Lord has so much more work for us to do. Let’s clear whatever obstacle stands in the way of an overflowing flood of grace, joy and giving.

Let’s live like Fred. This year, on February 14, Valentine’s Day, Fred Rapell went to join his beloved wife Dot in the house of the Lord. When we held his Memorial Service at Woodside one person who was not there...was Fred. The man who gave away everything even donated his body to advance medical knowledge. After the memorial service I received a letter from his daughter Kyle. She gave me permission to share it with you. Here’s what she wrote,

Dear Pastor Doug,

Dad didn't leave me with many 'gotta do' items to take care of upon the occasion of his passing but one he insisted up on was satisfying his pledge to Woodside Church in whichever year he would leave us. He'd say, "Kyle, I don't care if I go in January or in November, pay what remains on my pledge!" Enclosed you'll find a check in that amount to help me keep my promise to Dad and for him to keep his promise to his church.

Fred Rapel was not just Graceful. He was GraceFLOW. Not even death could stop the grace from flowing through him.

Let's live like Fred.