

Grace Happens
Colossians 3:12 -17
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*12 So, chosen by God for this new life of love, dress in the wardrobe God picked out for you: compassion, kindness, humility, quiet strength, discipline. 13 Be even-tempered, content with second place, quick to forgive an offense. Forgive as quickly and completely as the Master forgave you. 14 And regardless of what else you put on, wear love. It's your basic, all-purpose garment. Never be without it. 15 Let the peace of Christ keep you in tune with each other, in step with each other. None of this going off and doing your own thing. And cultivate thankfulness. 16 Let the Word of Christ - the Message - have the run of the house. Give it plenty of room in your lives. Instruct and direct one another using good common sense. And sing, sing your hearts out to God! 17 Let every detail in your lives - words, actions, whatever - be done in the name of the Master, Jesus, thanking God the Father every step of the way. **(The Message)***

Four weeks ago today, Rick was in the hospital, diagnosed with a mild stroke. I dashed into church that morning to perform the baptism of Randall and Amber Harrer (what a joy THAT was on a stressful morning) and to pick some things so I could work mainly at home for the coming week. Among the stuff I grabbed was a book I'd had on my shelf for a while but never really read. It's called *Seasons of Grace: The Life-Giving Practice of Gratitude*.

In the book, the authors Alan Jones and John O'Neil tell the story of George. George has had a hard life. He nearly died from prostate cancer a few years ago. His wife passed away recently and he rarely sees his adult children. He has little money and lives in a rundown part of town. Yet George is invariably upbeat and cheerful. When asked the secret to his sunny outlook, George replied that there are basically only three responses to life: "Damn!", "Help!", and "Thank you!" George admits that he has tried all three responses, but found it was the third that was the most helpful. He says, "I've

faced a lot of crap in my life, including death, and I decided I might as well live...as gratefully as I could. Every day's a gift and I don't want to waste it in either cynicism or self-pity."

I read this story as I was sitting in Rick's hospital room. It really struck home to me because I'd been experiencing all three of these responses. "Damn!" Why has this happened? Rick has done everything right to prevent a stroke. He's too young. This just isn't fair. "Help!" Help, doctors and nurses and CatScan and MRI technicians! Help, Josh, and take over the worship services. Help, church family, and pray for my husband. Help, God.ⁱ

And thank you! Thank you, thank you, and thank you that it wasn't worse. Thank you for caring nurses and doctors and MRI's and CatScans and echo cardiograms and decent health insurance Thank you, Josh and church family. Thank you, God.

There are times when we need to say "damn!" and ask why me? There are certainly times when we need to reach out for help. But we don't want to always be in a place of either self-pity or dependence. Where we want to dwell is in that place of thanksgiving. To do as the writer of Colossians says and "cultivate thankfulness," to "thank God every step of the way." Every single day.

Not just on Thanksgiving Day. Not just in the mountain moments—new baby, wedding, graduation, and great vacations. Not just when the news is good—it's not cancer, you're getting a raise, they've accepted your bid on the house, and it's just a mild stroke. But cultivate thanksgiving every day—good days, bad days, and the

thousands of days in between that are neither good nor bad, not extraordinary in any way. The days where we spend most of our lives.

There's a well known saying, which can be paraphrased to "Stuff happens." Most of us all too are aware that stuff happens. The furnace breaks down—or the car or the dishwasher or the garage door opener. . . Our kids are having problems. The stock market tanks AGAIN. Congress is deadlocked—AGAIN. Stuff happens. We are very in touch with that reality.

What we are sometimes less in touch with is that Grace happens. Surely Christians more than anyone else should be aware of this fundamental truth. That's what I love about this exuberant passage from Colossians: The sense that if God's word has taken root in our lives, we will sing, sing our hearts out with joy and thanksgiving. We won't be able to contain ourselves because we will be so full of a sense of thankfulness.

Yet as far as I can see, we Christians are just as prone as anyone else to moan and groan and complain. We are just as apt as a non-Christian to say, "Ain't it awful!" We seem just as likely as non-believers to take for granted all the blessings in our lives. Our good fortune in having enough to eat, access to great medical care, healthy children, warm, comfortable homes. For quite literally billions in the world this would be wealth beyond all imagining, but most of the time we don't even notice this abundance.

Yet the very fact that each of us with in all our uniqueness is alive at all is a miracle. I recently ran across these rather staggering statistics.

The odds of your parents meeting	1 in 20,000
The odds of their staying together long enough to have children	1 in 2,000
The odds of particular egg and sperm coming together to make YOU	1 in 400 quadrillion
The odds that your specific genetic lineage has remained intact through time to create the egg & sperm that made you	1 in $10^{45,000}$
Odds of the right sperm meeting the right egg 150,000 times to create your unique ancestral line	1 in $10^{2,640,000}$

So basically, the odds of as you as you ever being born at all are basically zero. We are each and every one of us a miracle.

That we are blessed to exist in this time and particularly in this country is even more of a miracle. Just be being born in the United States means we have already won what Warren Buffet wisely calls “the ovarian lottery.” That we live here and now, that we live at all, is a miracle, a cause for rejoicing, and a cause to be thankful. Poet Wendell Berry says, “Be joyful even though you have considered all the facts.” And while this is true sometime, in many ways we should be joyful BECAUSE we have considered all the facts: the fact of our very existence, the privilege of living in this country, the abundance of uncounted blessings.

Yet most of us, most of the time, take our blessings, big and small, for granted. We would do well to borrow the practice of “mindfulness” from our Buddhist brothers and sisters. Mindfulness, which is a fundamental principle of Buddhism, is a state of being actively, openly aware of the present, and the beauty of each moment.

Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore wrote, “For many years, at great cost, I traveled through many countries; saw the high mountains, the oceans. The only things I did not see were the sparkling dew drops on the grass just outside my door.”

The challenge for us as Christians is not just to be thankful in the easy moments or the big moments, but in the everyday moments, to see God not just in mountains or oceans, but in the sparkling dew drops right outside our doors.

In her book *Out of the Ordinary*, Joyce Rupp challenges herself to be grateful for the little moments. She writes,

gratitude, yes,
for all the big things
that stand tall,
thick with abundance,
joy, fruitfulness.
I cannot help
but applaud
their presence.

but deep thankfulness
for the bite-sized
pieces of my life?
I had not thought of them,
those little snippets of time
so easily consumed
in the hurry and blur
of pretentious days.

the little moments
assumed and presumed,
slip quickly through
the fingers of my busy life.ⁱⁱ

It is true for all of us, isn't it—the little moments, the bite-size graces, are easily consumed and quickly forgotten. Yet it is awareness of these moments, thankfulness for these moments, the ability to live with grateful hearts, that can make the all the

difference between being someone who complains “Stuff happens” or someone who says with confidence and joy, “Grace happens.”

So I’ve been making a list of some of the “bite-sized” pieces of grace that make up my life, and which I usually take for granted.

Wrapping my hands around a mug of hot tea on a cold day
 A purring cat curled up on my lap
 A really good mystery novel
 Great big fat snowflakes that glisten on trees and grass but not on the road
 Road crews who stay up all night cleaning the snow so I have safe streets to drive on
 The sliver of a new moon in the night sky
 The Sufi poet Hafiz
 Freshly picked corn on the cob
 Any painting by Monet
 Getting new photos of my grandbabies
 The smell of bread baking
 A band-aid when I’ve cut my finger
 Towels right out of the clothes dryer
 My clothes dryer
 Good hair days
 Cable television (I know this makes me shallow, but I do appreciate it)
 Real letters that come by mail that you open and read and keep
 The smell of summer rain
 Freshly ironed clothes
 Friday brunch with my husband
 The drunken stagger babies have when they’re just learning to walk
 The sound of lawn mowers on a lazy summer afternoon
 A movie that makes me laugh
 The crackle of a fire in the fireplace
 A carpet of golden leaves under an autumn tree

Grace happens. For the big mountain moments of joy, and for bite-sized graces, let us, as the writer of Colossians says, “sing, sing our hearts out to God, thanking God every step of the way.”

¹ Seasons of Grace by Alan Jones and John O’Neil. John Wiley and Sons. 2003. P. 4

ⁱⁱ Out of the Ordinary: Prayers, Poems, and Reflections for Every Season. Ave Maria Press. 2000. P. 204.