

Christ Episcopal Church, Valdosta

“Grace and Grit” (Romans 5:6-8)

June 14, 2020

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In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

In her recent amazing commencement speech our own Josie Tidmore used a brilliant phrase: “grace and grit.” Grace and grit...there it is! After doing a search on Google I learned that “Grace and Grit” is the title of a country music song by Meghan Patrick, as well as a catering company in Long Island, and a restaurant in Charleston, South Carolina—but I digress. “Grace and grit” is actually an accurate and concise description of both the gospel itself and our response to the gospel.

“Grace and grit”...the order is important...grace is first; grit is second.

As you know, here at Christ Church we talk a lot about God’s grace. This is because God’s grace, God’s one-way unconditional never-ending love for all of us, is the heart of the gospel: no grace, no gospel. Scripture is clear that in Jesus Christ God has offered all of us “grace upon grace” (John 1:16), that “by grace you have been saved” (Ephesians 2:8), that in Jesus Christ “the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all” (Titus 2:11).

All of us need grace every day no matter who we are or what is going on in our lives—and every person you know also needs grace every day, no matter who they are or what is going on in their lives. That is why here at Christ Church we are about receiving God’s grace in Jesus Christ and sharing that grace with one another and the world. We receive God’s grace in Word and Sacrament—the gospel of God’s grace preached and the sacraments of God’s grace administered—and we share that grace with one another and the world in a myriad of ways as led and empowered by the Holy Spirit.

Grace and grit...grace is first, followed by grit.

What is grit? In her insightful 2013 TED Talk University of Pennsylvania professor Angela Lee Duckworth described extensive research she and her academic team did in a variety of contexts in an effort to learn more about who succeeds and why. She then shares what they discovered. Listen to this:

In all those very different contexts one characteristic emerged as a significant predictor of success—and it wasn't social intelligence, it wasn't good looks, it wasn't physical health, and it wasn't IQ. It was grit. Grit is passion and perseverance for very long term goals. Grit is having stamina. Grit is sticking with your future, day in, day out—not just for the week, not just for the month, but for years—and working really hard to make that future a reality. Grit is living life like it's a marathon, not a sprint.

That is good news for those of us who may not have much social intelligence, good news for those of us who may not have good looks or whose physical health is sketchy, good news for those of us whose IQ is nothing to brag about. When it comes to grit you do not have to be a social butterfly, or a supermodel, or a CrossFit instructor, or a member of Mensa International—because grit has to do with something that goes ways past all these things: your heart.

Grit begins in your heart. Passion and perseverance for very long term goals begin in your heart. The grit required for running a marathon rather than just a sprint begins in your heart. Grit begins in your heart, and impacts how you view what you spend your time doing every day. A few years after giving her TED Talk Angela Lee Duckworth published her 2016 book *Grit: The Power of Passion and Perseverance*, which includes the following parable:

Three bricklayers are asked, “What are you doing?” The first says, “I am laying bricks.” The second says, “I am building a church.” And the third says, “I am building the house of God.” The first bricklayer has a job. The second has a career. The third has a calling (147).

Grit begins in your heart and reminds you that as you are metaphorically laying bricks in your life, by God's grace you are actually building the house of God.

Perhaps you have heard of Spartan obstacle course races. These races are standard road race distances but over difficult terrain and replete with difficult obstacles like crawling through mud under barbed wire, scaling walls, traversing swamps, carrying 100-pound spheres of cement, and other “fun” activities. The founder of Spartan races is Joe de Sena, who has himself done many superhuman feats, including completing the 1,150 mile Alaska Iditarod through at times waist deep snow and 100 degrees below zero race *on foot*. Joe de Sena overflows with grit.

Joe de Sena asserts that when it comes to having the grit to follow through on your commitments you need to do three things: first, put yourself out there by going public with your commitment; second, put something on the line; and third, have no escape plan. (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qQ8K5VWWBIM>).

Lest you think this sermon is some kind of motivational speech, remember that grace is first, followed by grit. Grit is a response to God's grace. The grit that begins in your heart is a response to the grace that began in God's heart. In today's passage from Paul's Letter to the Romans we clearly see both grace and grit:

While we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us (Romans 5:6-8).

The ultimate expression of God's grace—God's one-way unconditional never-ending love for all of us, including you—is Jesus' death on the cross. Jesus went public with his commitment to save you, as he told his disciples at the Last Supper, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13) and then did so publicly the very next day. When it came to Jesus' commitment to save you, Jesus went beyond putting something on the line as he put himself on the line by allowing Roman soldiers to put him on a cross. When it came to Jesus' commitment to save you, he had no escape plan. Jesus showed immeasurable grit as he suffered and died out of immeasurable grace toward you. That is how God proved his love. God could not love us any more than that.

And it is this grace of God given us on Good Friday that can inspire grit in us. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews put it this way:

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary or lose heart (Hebrews 12:1-3).

Jesus demonstrated unimaginable grit as he “endured the cross and “endured such hostility against himself from sinners”—sinners like you and me. And in response to Jesus’ grace and grit we are called to “run with perseverance the race that is set before us”, to develop grit and “not lose heart.” Grace and grit.

Mother Theresa (1910–1997) showed tremendous grit in decades of ministry among the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India. In 1979 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, and in 2016 was canonized. Inscribed on the wall of the children’s home in Calcutta is her poem entitled “Anyway”, which shows us what it looks like to respond to God’s grace with grit in sharing that grace with others:

People are often unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered. Forgive them anyway. If you are kind, people may accuse you of selfish, ulterior motives. Be kind anyway. If you are successful, you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway. If you are honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway. What you spend years creating, others could destroy overnight. Create anyway. If you find serenity and happiness, some may be jealous. Be happy anyway. The good you do today will often be forgotten. Do good anyway. Give the best you have, and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway. In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway.

Throughout his earthly ministry Jesus did all of that. When people were “unreasonable, irrational, and self-centered” he forgave them anyway—and still does. When Jesus’ kindness was questioned and naysayers assumed he was simply currying favor for selfish gain he remained kind anyway—and still is. Jesus dealt with both “unfaithful friends” and “genuine enemies” but remained a faithful friend and loved his enemies anyway—and still does. In response to the deceit of others Jesus remained honest and sincere—and still is. Jesus gave the best he had, his actual life, and although some still think his death is not enough—it still is.

In laying down his life on the cross Jesus showed his earthly ministry was indeed infinitely more than a job or career, for he was indeed building the church, the house of God, and he still is—and you, *you*, are part of that church, that house of God, with Jesus himself is the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:19-20).

Grace and grit...today may God's grace—God's one-way unconditional never ending love for you—and God's grit—God's passion and perseverance for the very long term goal of your eternal salvation—inspire grit in you, so that you “may not grow weary and lose heart.”

Amen.