

Bishop's Convocation 2017 Sermon

Grace and peace to you from God the Creator and the Lord Jesus. Amen.

You might remember the name Ian Grillot. He's the young ex-Marine who was having a beer in Austin's in Olathe one night last March when a man walked up to two Indian nationals sitting at the bar, reportedly yelled "Get out of my country!" and then pulled a gun and shot both men, killing one. He then squeezed off several random shots around the bar.

When the shots rang out, everybody hit the deck and took cover, including Ian. But when the gunman turned and started for the door, Ian jumped up and tried to tackle him. But there was one more round in the clip; the gunman turned and fired one last shot, the bullet hitting Ian in his right hand and passing into his shoulder and lodging in his chest. The gunman escaped the bar that night but was later apprehended.

I've known Ian Grillot most of his life. He and his family are members of the church I served for many years. Ian was a regular, every-Sunday church-goer. It wasn't by his desire – his parents were excellent encouragers in that regard – but there he was, every Sunday, in the back pew (most popular seats in the house).

I would describe Ian as a very careful sermon-listener. He took it all in, listening as the story of God unfolded through the pages and the stories of the Bible; listening as the story of Jesus unfolded through the pages of the Gospels ... the story of this man who lived for others, whose life was a life of service for others, who ultimately gave his very life as an act of love for others. Year after year. Month after month. Every Sunday.

Two days after the shooting, I went to see Ian in the hospital. As he recounted the experience of jumping up, empty-handed, and trying to subdue a man who was still wielding a gun, I asked, "Ian, what were you thinking?"

"Well, I don't think I was thinking anything in particular," he said. "It was just that I couldn't imagine letting him go and maybe doing this to some other people. It was just what anybody should have done. I guess I thought it was just the right thing to do."

At a time of fear and high anxiety, Ian connected with his core values, his fundamental principles – he went back to basics – and there found the courage to do what he considered "the right thing."

As we begin this year's convocation with its focus on Discipleship, we might think of discipleship as going back to the basics and reconnecting with our fundamentals in order to become our truest selves.

Discipleship – it's the third of four themes we're using to explore the reality of HOPE. We are people of hope because of the life, death, Resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ and our faith in that gift. So we're deepening our identity as people of hope in terms of Leadership (our first year), Stewardship (the second year), Discipleship, and, next year, Evangelism. As you know, "disciple," the noun, means "learner," so we who are called to preach, teach, and lead in congregations will do some learning about our theological heritage as Lutheran Christians and how that heritage informs our ministries today.

We are also guided by our Gospel text, the same text we used at our synod assembly last June, the words of Jesus in John 12: “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies it remains just a single grain; but if it dies it bears much fruit.” Something has to die, to give way, to yield, in order for new life to emerge. We know about that reality in our agricultural states of Missouri and Kansas, but the same inevitability applies to us and governs our spiritual lives as well. So what must give way in us if we are to become more faithful learners and leaders in this Gospel work to which Jesus has called us?

We’ve been lifting up that question in our synod recently, though we’ve been phrasing it differently. In this latest round of area ministry visits we’ve been asking our rostered ministers and our Parish Ministry Associates to imagine their lives as a cup, and we’ve been asking a couple of questions: What’s in your cup now? And what do you think Jesus wants in your cup?

So what’s in our cup, we proclaimers and teachers of the Word? We talked about much that is good: relationships, gratitude, sports, love, serving, work, education, family, music, time with friends. But we also got honest about what else is in our cups, some things we wished weren’t there: worry, anger, fatigue, self-centeredness, guilt, fear of the unknown, loneliness, depression.

So what does Jesus want in our cups? Love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control – all of what Paul writes to the Galatians as the Fruits of the Spirit – grace, forgiveness, generosity, sense of humor, suffering, righteous indignation, reconciliation, courage, humility.

So, how do we take the anxious contents of our cups and replace them with the goodness God wants for us?

We don’t.

Filling our cups with the goodness of God is not something we do; it’s already been done for us, in our baptism. Our cups already contain forgiveness and grace and the good news that we are loved and accepted by God unconditionally, no strings attached, and that nothing in all of creation can ever separate us from the love that God has for us in Christ Jesus.

Sounds pretty basic, doesn’t it? In fact, in this year in which we’re commemorating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation, we find ourselves drawn back again and again to the basics. When Luther unpacked the Apostles Creed and got down to basics, he found nothing but grace: “I believe that Jesus Christ, true God, son of the Father from eternity; and true man, born of the virgin Mary, is my Lord. At great cost he has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person. He has saved me from sin, death, and the power of the devil, not with silver or gold but with his holy and precious blood and his innocent suffering and death. All this he has done that I might be his own, live under in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and live and rules eternally. This is most certainly true.” Grace, and more grace.

Brother and sister preachers and teachers, grace is at the very heart of our common life and witness. But there is a great temptation to downplay that gift, because while grace and mercy are basic to our identity, we live in a culture in love with law and condemnation. In that environment, grace can be seen as a great weakness.

Yes, grace can be seen as a weakness in a punitive culture like ours, home to 4.4 percent of the world’s population but 24 percent of the world’s prison population, despite what Pew Research

documents as a sharp decline in the rate of violent crime and a significant decline in the rate of property crime since 1993. Grace can even be seen as a weakness in our church culture, where we've seen several of our congregations here in the Central States Synod enticed away by more law-centered church bodies.

In the face of all of that, we might be tempted to soft-pedal the basics, ease away from the theology of the cross toward the theology of glory. After all, we know where the theology of the cross leads, and we surely don't want to lose more members from our pews. We surely don't want to lose more congregations.

And yet ... "unless a grain of wheat dies"

Sisters and brothers, what has to die in us is our fear of losing.

The survival of the Church is in the hands of the Holy Spirit, and the Spirit, who is totally and completely free, will do what the Spirit wants to do. It is for us, God's little talkers, to proclaim the goodness and grace and mercy of God, come what may.

I need to be reminded of that basic fact of my calling, so on my desk in my office sits a 2½ by 4-inch plaque bearing three little words. Three little words that I look at several times a day, to keep my perspective and my attitude clear: PLAY YOUR GAME.



PLAY YOUR GAME, because the temptation to play someone else's game, a more popular, safer game, can be so strong. But we are not called to safety. We've been given a grace-filled Gospel to proclaim by the Savior of the world. So, like Ian Grillot, when you find yourself in a time of fear and high anxiety, dig deep. Claim your discipleship. Return to your basics in the One who is the perfect love that casts out fear. Preach grace. Play your game.

Amen.

—Bishop Roger Gustafson