



Photo by Susan Pfretzschner

Stewardship 2021

Gifts of Grace

Dear Friends,

Welcome to January 2021. Since we're not gathering just yet, we thought you might enjoy hearing the voices of friends and seeing through the eyes of artists in our community who share their talents with us. It's been a joy for me to assemble this jigsaw puzzle of words and images.

We are grateful to our youth and members of the Memoir Writing Group, McMane Arts Ministry and the Poetry Group for their generosity, as well as our church Committees and Boards for conveying the blessings to your homes.

As we start this new year with an Epiphany visit from the magi, may these gifts bring opportunities to connect in new ways.

The Stewardship Committee
Laura McCutchen, Curator



The Stewardship Committee

Libby Black, Chair	Betsy Barrett	Karen Cumbo
Allison Hamm	Jon Hinebach	Jeanne Lounsbury
Laura McCutchen	Nicole Speer	Nancy Stevens
Chris Braudaway-Baumann, Senior Minister		

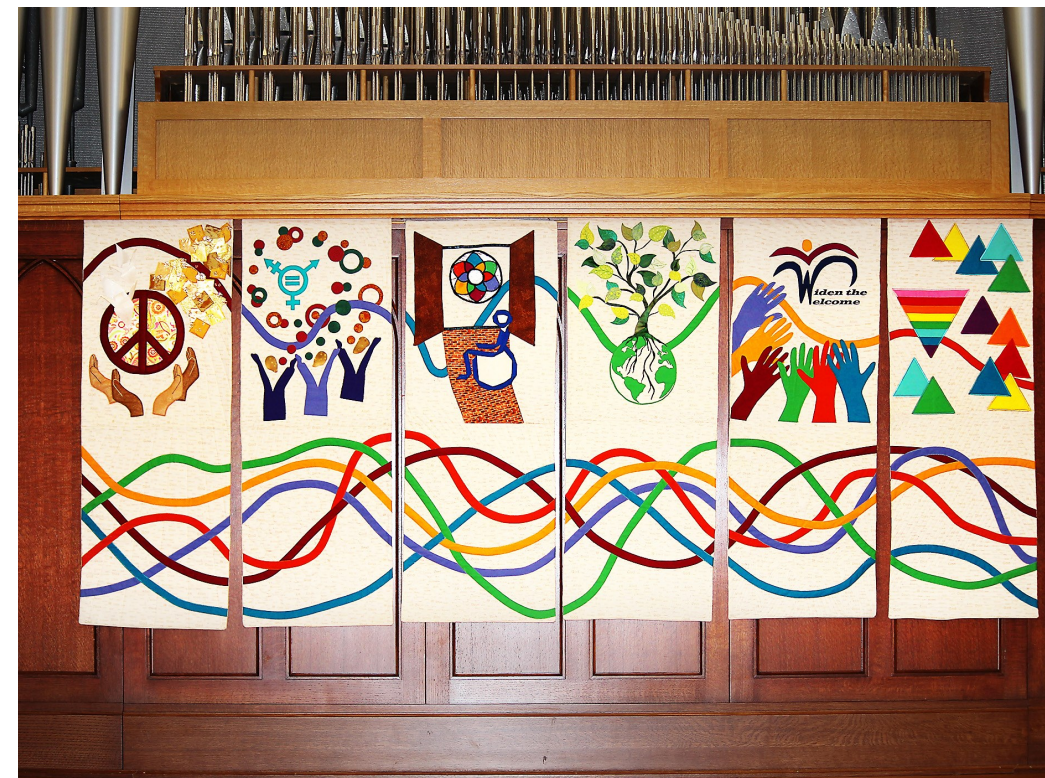
New Wine Skins at First Congregational Church Weekly Devotional

He told them this parable: "No one tears a piece out of a new garment to patch an old one. Otherwise, they will have torn the new garment, and the patch from the new will not match the old. And no one pours new wine into old wineskins. Otherwise, the new wine will burst the skins; the wine will run out and the wineskins will be ruined. No, new wine must be poured into new wineskins. And no one after drinking old wine wants the new, for they say, 'The old is better.'"

Luke 5: 36-39

As McKenzie Lecture guest, Larry Rasmussen, launched into his November 15 sermon, "In the Midst of New Dimensions," I listened to, then read and re-read the scripture for the day. I didn't quite understand it, which is usual for me when reading the Bible. But Larry unfolded the scripture with numerous examples that rang true in my heart. By the end of the sermon, I decided that Larry was trying to get us to understand that the world will not return to "normal" as we seem to yearn for. Jesus spent much of his teachings attempting to get his followers to think differently and challenge assumptions on conventional thoughts with disease, the poor, women, and sinners. Accept the changes that are coming, put on a new garment, put the wine into a new skin. Yes, it may be uncomfortable and hard, but we need not fear the future. We do need to "put on our boots, grab a clip board, enter a new dimension and calmly plot the resurrection."

Larry's words of hope and forward thinking emphasize that it is up to us to re-think our approach in dealing with global pandemics, climate change, white privilege, gender identity, and mass uncertainty in the world. My thought is, "What better place than First Congregational Church UCC Boulder to lead us into our new normal?" FCC is founded on principles that provide the framework of active engagement in the life ahead. Six covenants that we stand by and support - Inclusive Language, Just Peace, Open & Affirming, Whole Earth, Accessible to All and W.I.S.E. - provide the foundation. In addition to the covenants, FCC supports issues associated with racism, immigration, local community action and global concerns that provide much of the structure.



FCC Covenants, parameters by Arts Committee

Supporting FCC with our time, talents and giving allows us to move into the New Dimension. We may perhaps move with trepidation and anxiety, but we move with the support group of like-minded people who can tap into our spirit, settle in for the long haul and address the new world. As Larry concludes, "hone skills for weaving a new cloth and tanning new wine skins." I believe we have the support structure to do this with First Congregational Church UCC, Boulder.

God, please lead us into the future, alongside our friends at First Congregational Church, with hope and anticipation.

Jeanne Lounsbury
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A LAMENT TO NORMAL
Devotional for an FCC Board Meeting

I long for normal.

You know, the time when the worst thing I worried about touching was dog poop or raw chicken, not a gas pump.

When I could hug those I love with abandon.

When I could sit in close quarters discussing the tedium of church business.

Normal was when I could break out in full-throated song with others, travel across the world, shake hands with a new client, eat dinner with a good friend in close enough proximity to be able to hear each other.

Dear Lord, I'm tired of being cooped up in my house and it's not even winter yet.

My Dad says we can't waste time worrying about things we have no control over. He's always full of good advice. But I really hate not being able to be there for him, knowing his 94th year is slipping into his 95th with God only knows how many or few more.

I imagine you feel just the same as I do. Wouldn't it be great if we could be together to commiserate?

We have fewer chances to say important things in this time. So in closing, here is what I want you to know:

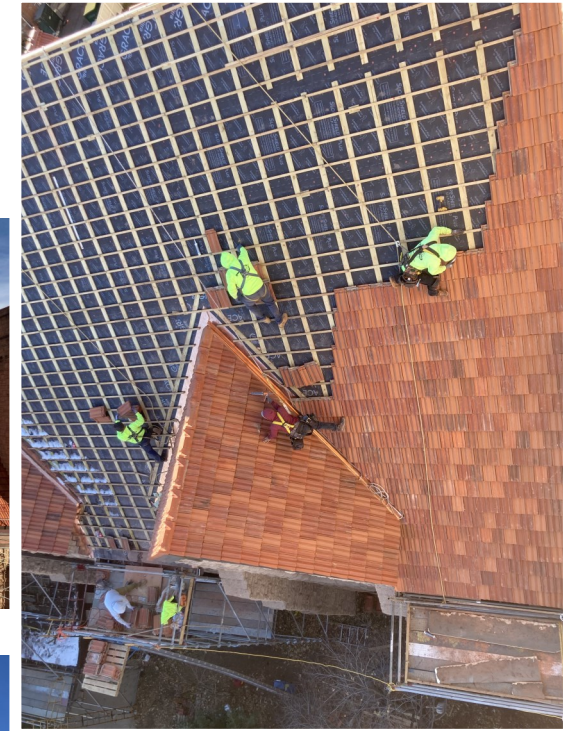
I appreciate just the thought of you, knowing that you are there.

I appreciate your steadfastness with Zoom meetings on behalf of our church and your quiet work behind the scenes – work which more than ever is now truly unseen.

I appreciate what each and every one of you brings to this gathering every month, and I hope to see all of you again next month.

Susan Bryant
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January 6, 2021



Photos by **Bob Matthias**, matthias44122@yahoo.com

Finding Grace in a Pandemic

Back in the beginning of the pandemic, many were eliding that word to “panic” and worrying with every little symptom. We made project lists and stocked our cupboards and worried a lot. On my list of projects was a review of my advance directives about end-of-life care, especially after hearing about the risks of intubation. I re-read Being Mortal and cried while reading the daily heartbreaking stories of health-care workers and grieving families.

I realized how blessed I am—I have shelter, food, and enjoyed a great visit with our son and his family right before the lockdown. I have a wonderful church community that I know will sustain me through whatever happens next. The reflections of the past year have given me a sense of contentment with my life—family, spiritual, work, and who I am. The social justice crises of the year have taught me that I can still learn and grow in understanding and compassion, and there is still much work to do. But this hard time will pass, eventually, and Marge Piercy says it better.

Doors Opening, Closing on Us, by Marge Piercy

*Maybe there is more of the magical
in the idea of a door than in the door
itself. It's always a matter of going
through into something else. But*

*while some doors lead to cathedrals
arching up overhead like stormy skies
and some to sumptuous auditoriums
and some to caves of nuclear monsters*

*most just yield a bathroom or a closet
Still, the image of a door is liminal,
passing from one place into another
one state to the other, boundaries*

*and promises and threats. Inside
to outside, light into dark, dark into
light, cold into warm, known into
strange, safe into terror, wind*

*into stillness, silence into noise
or music. We slice our life into
segments by rituals, each a door
to a presumed new phase. We see*

*ourselves progressing from room
to room perhaps dragging our toys
along until the last door opens
and we pass into was.*

Karen Cumbo
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January 7, 2021

Gifts

I was asked, “What gifts of grace sustain you?”
My answer was immediate, “Singing, of course!”

For me, singing is a natural gift. My first lead performance was in the musical we put on in kindergarten. Public performances have continued throughout my lifetime and are enriched when I can perform with Marj.

But the key word in the question is “Sustain.”

Singing is like the Book of Psalms; there are both Psalms of joy and Psalms of despair. During times of despair I don’t necessarily sing songs for joy, but rather, I sing songs that express the common human emotions of pain and sorrow.

But it’s not really the songs I sing that sustain me. Rather, it is those songs that sing me.

Dean Fowler
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Photo from Dean Fowler

Photo by Susan Pfretzschner,
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January 8, 2021

Grace on My Front Porch

Peace be within thy walls, and prosperity within thy palaces. Psalm 122:7

My front porch in Fruita, Colorado has become my palace during this long winter. Facing the south, catching the sun but sheltered from the wind, my porch is a peaceful haven for me. When I am sitting there, I can I avoid the tedium of an indoor life, as well as enjoy contact with my friends and neighbors.

I live in a 55 years plus community where most of the people are retired. They love to walk their dogs, or simply walk for the exercise. Often, they pause for a chat. For their convenience, I have placed two chairs on my porch - six feet apart as recommended today.

As I enjoy my Fruita porch, I am reminded of similar places I have enjoyed in my life. As a child, living with my family in hot Oklahoma (during the dust bowl - yes, that was in the 1930's, but I remember it well) we used our large porch for many activities in the summer.

Mornings were often set aside for food preparation. I remember peeling juicy peaches so my mother could make preserves. I would eat about as many pieces as I would put in the mixing bowl. I can still feel the juice running through my hands and down my elbows. But we were on the porch - no worry about making a mess. Just get the hose and wash it away.

In the evenings we would welcome visitors or relatives who dropped by for a visit. Political talk was about FDR and the depression, and sometimes it became as heated as that of today.

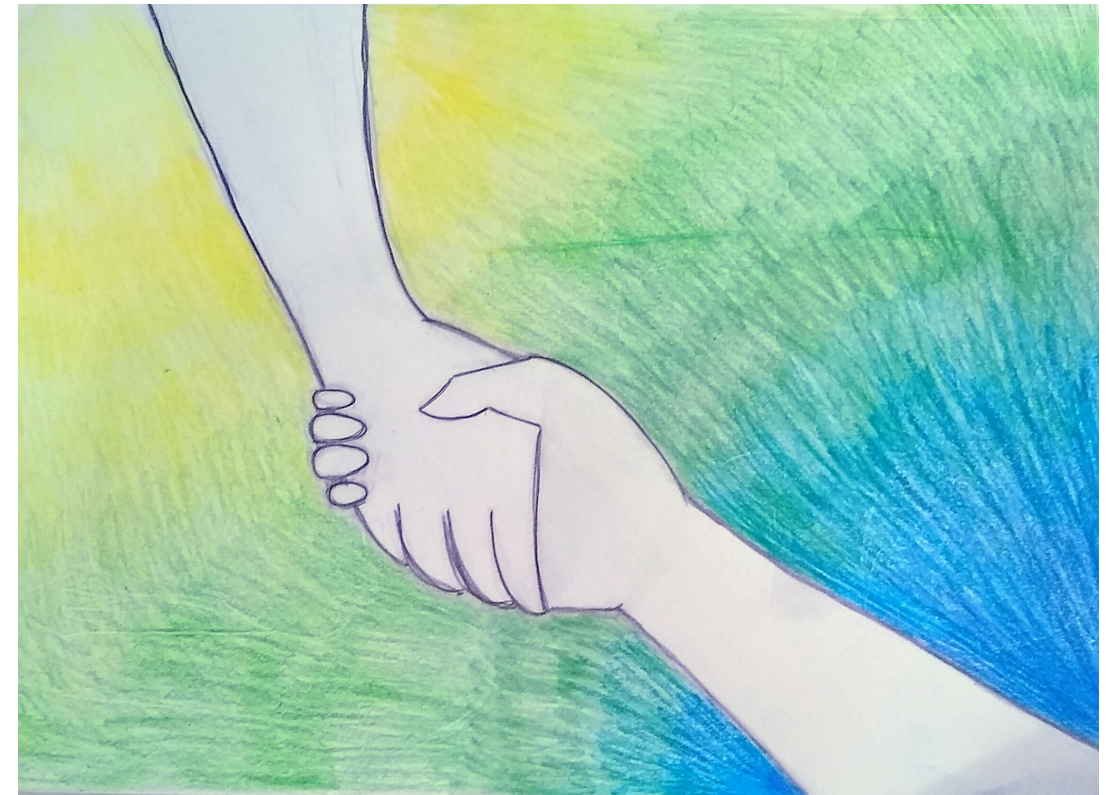
Can you recall pleasant times you have had on a front porch? With family? friends? events? blessings?

As I isolate myself, waiting for the winter to pass, I don't feel that I am "stuck at home." I prefer to say, "I am safe at home." What a blessing. What grace.

Jeanette Ford

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January 9, 2021



Drawing by Lillie Thomasset

Helping Hands

A helping hand from my family during these challenging times is a gift of grace that has kept me going and doing my best.

Lillie Thomasset

January 10, 2021



Moraine Park Winter

GRACE IS THE GIFT

As children we took our turns saying “grace” before the evening meal. And on occasion the phrase “but for the grace of God” was spoken by an adult to signify having been passed over by some potentially harrowing or tragic event—whether in one’s own life or that which was presently occurring in the life of another. We never wanted to act in a “disgraceful” manner, or to be considered a “disgrace.” And, especially as young women, we needed to be “graceful” in “the social graces.”

These expressions of “grace” all connote the burden of responsibility to perform or achieve or merit. And each veers close to notions of, if not perfection, then at least adequacy in meeting established standards. And then to await the judgment of parent, neighbor, peer—and, indeed, God.

I was fortunate in my faith upbringing to learn that God is Love, slow to anger, and not punishing or wrathful. I am thankful for this faith foundation. But it was as a seminary student nearly 45 years ago that I first understood grace as the freely given and unmerited love of God, which God has bestowed on all Creation. It is not a competition, there are no judges or scores or quotas to be meted out, it is not something to be earned or rejected, it has no pre-fixes or suffixes—it just is! It is the ground of our being and, like the air that we breathe, it is just there. It is God’s unconditional love, God’s gift to us.

And the most special thing is that this gift makes it possible for us to open our hearts and minds to loving others as we are loved, to openness and generosity of spirit in our interactions, to caring and concern for others as expressions of our gratitude, and to justice work and peacemaking to do our part in making whole God’s Creation. None of this is required or evaluated, of course. It is simply the gift of grace should we choose to receive it.

Karen Hoover
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January 11, 2021

STEWARDSHIP

Weekly Devotional

For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. ~Matthew 6:21

My daughter is the most generous person I know. She rarely wants anything for herself and instead uses her birthdays and holidays as occasions to give gifts to friends and family members, or to strangers in need. Her treasure follows her heart, which is so filled with love that grace is second nature.

As we enter stewardship season, my daughter's generosity and grace are on my mind. Coming on the heels of Advent and coinciding with the start of a new year, stewardship is the perfect time to reflect on what we accomplished in the past year and what we will do in the year ahead.



Stars Brightly Shining

I am awed by the way our congregation rose to the challenges of 2020. What a gift God gave us, to pair fearless, creative staff with patient, generous members during such a liminal year! We stayed engaged and we grew in our relationships with God and with each other despite being physically apart for more than nine months. Hallelujah! Thank you for your 2020 pledges, that gave us the gifts of faith, hope, and love during a year of massive upheaval.

Our church's annual budget cannot exceed the total of our pledges, so our 2021 pledges are essential to keep our work going and to enable our congregation to respond to seen and unforeseen challenges in this new year. Please join me in pledging and, if you are able, increasing your pledge this year. We cannot know what this year will bring, but we can choose where our hearts will be.

Loving God, what treasure could surpass the gift of your grace? As we offer our treasures to advance your work, may our hearts open up to you. Amen.

Nicole Speer
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January 12, 2021

DO IT WITH GRACE

"Since you are Vice President, I am calling to tell you I am thinking of resigning as President."

The organization being discussed is the State chapter of a National professional association. The President was a benevolent dictator who personally did all the work necessary to produce a newsletter (at inconsistent times) and organize an annual conference. He never asked for help, just fit everything he could into an already busy schedule.

Not surprisingly, he felt unappreciated. Some members didn't like the location of the conference or they weren't pleased with the speaker we had year after year. He had been President, and I had been Vice President, since the inception.

Occasionally I forced him to accept some input, but mostly I ran interference between disgruntled Board members and the President. He had thin skin and took offense at criticism. I had talked him off the ledge before. This time I said, "Okay, but do it with grace."

"With what?" he said. He expected me to stroke his ego and mediate with the person who offended him. Instead, I suggested he consider where the offender was coming from and frame his response in terms of how tired he was of running everything.

Instead of just saying, "I quit," he could think about the association and how it served a purpose. If he resigned, it wouldn't necessarily fall apart as he assumed. He should think about how much longer he was willing to continue, and how it would affect the life and longevity of this thing he was so proud to have given birth.

In the end, he stuck with being President until his term was up, and then we had an orderly transition.

Louisa Young
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Old by Steve Frye, boulder-birdman@gmail.com

January 13, 2021



Nymph Lake

THIS WEIRD LIVING WATER

*And Jesus said, "Come to the water, stand by my side,
I know you are thirsty; you won't be denied.
I felt every teardrop, when in darkness you cried,
And I strove to remind you, that for those tears I died."*

Sometimes, I am tired. Tired to the bone.
Dried up like a desert riverbed in the late summer.
My faith is small as a mustard seed and fragile like my grandmother's lace.
I want to give up, but sooner or later, this song sneaks up on me.
I sang it for the first time as a teenager in my Christian youth group.
I loved the image of standing next to Jesus and not being denied.
Only later, when the doors slammed in my face, did I really understand.

But this hymn?
It was written by Marsha Stevens-Pino, songwriter and musician,
celebrated and adored by the evangelical Christian movement.
A few years later, the same people ripped her song out of their hymnbooks.
Why?

She had just come out as a lesbian, and they hated her for it.
So when I am wary, fatigued, fed-up, scared, isolated or feel like I do not belong
When my faith is like a dried-up riverbed and even my tears have no water in them,
This song gently embraces me, and God says to me:
*Come to the water, stand by my side,
I know you are thirsty; you won't be denied...*

And God bends over and forms Their hand like a cup,
fills it with water, and gives me to drink.
Gives me this weird living water, grace-filled and love-filled;
that requires nothing back.
I can stand, or sit or lie down, for as long as I need, by the well of God's living water.
I drink, and slowly the water heals me.

Hilde Raastad

January 14, 2021

When This is Over

When this is over,
May we never again take for granted
A handshake with a stranger, Full shelves at the store,
Conversations with neighbors,
A crowded theater, Friday night out,
The taste of communion, A routine checkup,
The school rush each morning, Coffee with a friend,
The stadium roaring, Each deep breath! A boring Tuesday. Life itself.

When this ends, may we find that we have become more like the people we
wanted to be,
We were called to be,
We hope to be,
And may we stay that way — Better for each other because of the worst.

By Laura Kelly Fanucci

Laura serves on the staff of the Collegeville Institute,
working with us on our Communities of Calling project.

Contributed by **Chris Braudaway-Bauman**
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Laying on Hands

January 15, 2021



Photo by **Phil Braudaway-Bauman**,
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Cross & candlesticks by **John Biseaglia**
Parament by **Jeanne Lounsbury**

Feast Pray Love



Photo by Keith Curry Lance



Columbine by
Jeanne Lounsbury



Community

From roommates to Zoommates
Staring twenty-five people in the eye at once
The kindness of friends
In close quarters, but apart
Connection in isolation
But sometimes you share too much
Rarely do you share responsibility for washing the
dishes though
Logging off after the breaking of bread
Remember, you can still smile behind a mask
But is it a smile if nobody can see it?
What do the eyes say?
Sharing moments the best way we can
Touching hearts when hands can't

We Are Anonymous
FCC Poetry Group



Photo by Susan Pfretzschner



Alma Alber, almaalber3@gmail.com

January 16, 2021



Culture

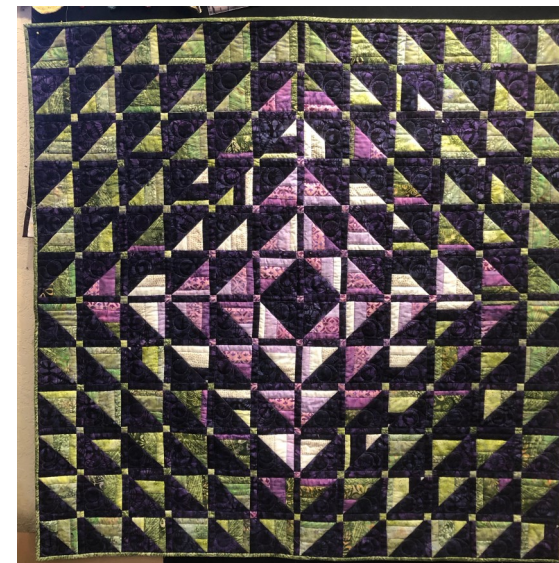
I bought the embroidered story cloth in the center of this quilt from Hmong artists, originally from South East Asia, that visited our church. I added the fabric frame using techniques developed by the Seminole women, indigenous tribes originally from Florida and now in Oklahoma. I find inspiration in the textile arts of women in history and around the world.

Quilts by Cindy Mueller



Friendship

A Gift of Grace is friendship, the stars in these quilts are historically called “friendship stars.” This wall hanging is kind of messy, colorful, dynamic and precious - very much like my friends and me.



Motherhood

I have made both baby and, more recently, wedding quilts for my nieces and nephew. Our most recent wedding was held at the justice of the peace. Following the wedding, my niece moved far away from her family. I made this quilt from scraps of the quilt I made for my niece, to give to her mother. I hope that it provides comfort and a warmth to my sister-in-law as she adjusts to not having her daughter nearby.

Cindy Mueller
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January 17, 2021

Used Dog

Hey! A few months back, I got a used dog
Rescue, they said.
Who is rescuing who?
I'm kind of used myself.

He came fuzzy, golden, uncertain, hungry.
He ate most of a huge bone before I could feed him.
He traveled long and far, from Houston.
I've never been to Houston.

Black, granulated callouses on his doggie elbows.
Too much time on cement. Hard surfaces.
I have callouses inside.
I have also traveled long and far.
Hard surfaces.

He is better at love.
Full bodied, wriggling, snuggling in.
No reservations. Wild tongue.
I am more careful.

A repair man told me to keep my ancient vacuum cleaner.
"They don't make them to last anymore," he said.
"This one will last." Good.
Used is good. Used is tested.
Used doesn't mean finished.

My used dog has memories.
He hates other dogs.
Genetics? Experience?
He can't tell me, except by actions.
What do they say?
"Actions speak louder than words."
I wish I could read his doggie mind.
I would love him through everything.

Rumi by Susan Rose



Susan Rose

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January 18, 2021

Preparing the Way Weekly Devotional

The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." Mark 1:3

I was particularly taken by Pastor Chris's sermon, "Preparing the Way" when she spoke of those who have paved the way for others; John the Baptist paving the way for Christ's ministry, and the two women who paved the way for Rosa Parks by refusing to give up their bus seats years before.

I began to think about our church and those who have gone before. If our calling, as Chris states, is to "reflect the light that is Christ," then what were those individual and collective ministries that prepared a way for us and enriched the lives of our community and the world? Reflecting on those questions for even a moment leads one to feel gratitude for this place we call home.

As we consider our own callings, I invite you to ask yourself, "Who has prepared the way for me in my life? "How am I reflecting the light that is Christ and preparing the way for others?"

Prayer: Thank you, God, for the blessings that have been bestowed upon us. May we find ways to reflect your light, share our gifts, and prepare the way for others. Amen.



Youth Group on Sunday

Eric Malmborg

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January 19, 2021

The Healer

Dawn is ushered in to rouse the sleeping day
Slowly she rises, pink and golden, on the horizon
Her raiment already selected by the seasons

Winter's cloaks are airy, soft and white
A blanket, it's lain, to cover the ground
In daylight it sparkles, enticing children out to play
They fashion chunky snowmen with soggy woolen mittens and sled down
Mother Earth's curves with abandon
Water becomes glass under its icy touch
Blustery and chilled, winter's breath pinks our cheeks

Spring arrives shyly, poking her head above ground
Lavender crocuses rise up between bright green shoots
Lemony daffodils in gay dresses pose for sun's warmth
Birds converse in branches of unfurling buds
The soothing sounds of gurgling brooks once again tickle our ears
Seeds are planted, new life rises again

Changing Seasons by Jeanne Lounsbury



January 20, 2021

Summer saunters in full of fun, lacking ambition
Sit by the shore and be lulled by the lazy waves
collapsing on the sand, she beckons
Sunkist faces, bare feet, cool, in the evening grass
Tangy lemonade, juicy crimson watermelon and darting
fireflies in the fields
Sit and watch the sun fall behind the mountains
Watch the sky light up in flames

Autumn is the artist, no earthy tones for her
With a brush of cool wind she paints the aspens saffron,
the maples burgundy, the ash tree ochre and
tangerine
She dots the landscape with shades of fire
Apples and pears from heavy laden trees, pumpkins and
cinnamon perfume kitchens, hearths are lit to
chase away the early chill
The trees shed their glorious robes preparing for winter
slumber
Their fallen leaves, dried and musty, crunch under our
feet and have a last dance in a swirling wind

Healers, all, these seasons and their gifts
Let sunshine caress your face, moonlight and glistening
stars fill your soul
Sounds of the wind, the birds and the waves lift your
spirit with their music
Mountains point to the sky, urging us upward to view
the majesty

Receive it.
Mother Earth's abundant care surrounds us, to nourish
and restore.
Partake.

Joanne O'Keefe
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Jeanne Lounsbury, jeannelounsbury@aol.com

Connections

My long-time friend Cathy is ebullient, sharing with me over the phone every single thing she has to be grateful for: “We have a warm house and good food to eat,” she says, “and I get to see my grandkids every once in awhile. I am reading every day – lots of good books that take me to other places.”

I smile at her enthusiastic gratitude. I feel buoyed by her optimism.

Cathy and I met in 1984 when we worked at a law firm in south Denver. We know each other’s life stories inside and out. She is a blessing to me. We usually talk on the phone twice a week in that kind of shorthand that old friends often use. We “get” each other.

Friendships like the one I share with Cathy have been my guiding lights during this worldwide pandemic. As retirees, we count ourselves beyond lucky. We aren’t homeschooling small children or worrying about finances. Thankfully, we haven’t become ill with the Coronavirus, although we both know people who have.

Over the past months, I have shared both my vulnerabilities and my joys with friends on warm sunny days in the park, sitting suitably distanced. I have spoken with a new church friend on Zoom on Tuesday mornings and with a high school friend every Thursday.

During this time of uncertainty, it has been my friends, both old and new, who have lent me support and talked me off the edge a time or two. These are the people I turn to when the monotony begins to wear away at my psyche, when the limitations imposed by this raging virus threaten to overwhelm me.

By the grace of God, these friends – these angels, really – have walked by my side every step of the way.

Nancy Wade
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January 21, 2021

What Gifts of Grace Sustain Me?

Presented with this as a writing prompt and told 300 words would be fine, my first thought was, “300 words should be easy.” Days later I was still stumped. I kept hitting the wall at the word “Grace.” Big “G” little “g,” I’ve always had a hard time defining the word when used in a religious context. “God’s Grace” or “There but for the grace of God go I,” have always made me cringe. Discussing my plight with a friend of considerable theological background, he suggested I drop the word “Grace.” As he said, it can be a religiously charged word and defined quite differently for each person. Possibly, I should just avoid it altogether.

I thought that would do it but no, not yet. So I decided to drop the word “gifts” and see if that helped. That left me with “What sustains me?” It seemed that whittling it down to this should lead to something. Come on, get inspired. I dug deep. Is it love of family, friends, and community? Is it the wonders of nature? Is it my connection to the universe, the vine of life so to speak? But are these things that sustain me? And what does it mean to be sustained anyway?

Dropping the word “sustain” left me with, “What, me?” This did not seem to lend itself to much, so I decided to try, “What gets me up every morning?” Maybe what I look forward to every morning, what gets me going, would lead to what sustains me. I might then reverse engineer all the way to at least “what gifts.” Try as I might, the best I could come up with was ... coffee. Simple gifts.

Roy McCutchen
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Photo by Roy McCutchen

Southeast of Somewhere

January 22, 2021

Faith as a Blessing

I deeply hold in my heart the Beatitudes in Matthew 5:3-12. Like any other person, my faith definitely has its ups and downs, and is not even close to being great. Though I've grown spiritually, I continue to learn and discover. My journey of faith has transformed from traditional to progressive, from questioning to understanding and accepting.

Yes, I still question. I get angry and it's hard to understand God's purpose at times, especially in the past several months. My older sister Liza lost her 10-day-old baby boy in the Philippines, apart from me in the U.S. and my younger sister, Czarina, in Europe. It is hard to mourn such a great loss, knowing we are so far from each other physically, with the uncertainty of when we can be together again. Like most of you with your loved ones, our next visit is up in the air.

There were unpleasant experiences throughout my thirty-eight years that definitely made me "broken." But when I look back at those unfortunate things, I am always in awe and ask, where did I find my courage? Despite the questioning, the anger, the pain and the brokenness from the past and how it's resurfaced from Adie's passing, doubting my faith is something that did not cross my mind. My husband told me once that I am the most "broken-whole" person he ever met. That's a compliment with how I get my act together despite being "broken."

Faith is a gift of grace; it is a blessing that keeps me together and where I find courage, refuge, and strength. Despite my shortcomings, God has faith in me, and I know God will never forsake me. Faith makes me whole, brave, and resilient. My faith helps me to love, care, and be a blessing to not only my family and friends, but especially for others who are in need. I continue to be a blessing for others as God continues to bless me.

Cezanne Calinawagan Mascioli
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January 23, 2021



Bonney Forbes bonforbes@gmail.com

Labyrinth

January 24, 2021

Watercolor by Catharine Woods,
cathywoods@comcast.net



Community Cranes

Grace is...

Grace is blessing others and giving thanks through words and actions.

Grace is the spirit of love in everyone

Grace reaches to everyone, regardless of race, gender, and sexuality.

Grace is thanks and giving.

Grace is love.

Vivian Thomasset

January 25, 2021

GRATITUDE Weekly Devotional

I believe that God desires that we be in a state of gratitude as much as possible. Here's what helps me. Every night before I sleep, I write five things I'm grateful for.

Some of my gratitudes are repetitive. One is my daily gratitude for Ben in my life and our daily rituals that embrace our day together. Sometimes I'm grateful for my accomplishments, big and small, like meditating that day or completing the frustrating and complicated job of copying and sending papers for our home refinancing. Some days I'm just grateful that I made it through the day.

I honestly don't know why life seems so stressful these days! What helps me is to take a few deep breaths, turn it all over to God and trust that God is with me.

The flip side of my daily distress routine begins when I wake up each morning. I take several deep breaths, then begin my prayer which turns my day over to God. If you would like to read my morning prayer, here it is ...

I give you this morning Lord, please take away any despair of yesterday. Help me to forgive the things that cause me pain and keep me bound. Help me to begin again. Please bless every person and situation I encounter today. Make me who You would have me be, that I will do what You would have me do. Thank you for this day.

A scripture comes to mind as I'm writing this ...

Give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Jesus Christ for you."
1 Thessalonians 5:18

I don't believe God wills our hard circumstances. I believe God wills us to be in a state of gratitude, as much as possible ... especially for God in our life. Good luck in these challenging times.

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January 26, 2021

SPARROWS

*“Let not your heart be troubled,” His tender word I hear
And resting on His goodness, I lose my doubts and fears ...
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.”*

Forgotten?

By 1905, the year Civilla D. Martin penned the lyrics to the popular hymn “His Eye Is on the Sparrow,” the output of the Olds Motor Vehicle Company, Cadillac, and Ford were fairly commonplace on American roads. But it seems unlikely an itinerant Galilean preacher centuries earlier could have imagined the miracle of 2,750 pounds of sheet metal, plastic, fabric, and electronics that, when combined in a very specific way, results in a 2008 Honda Civic LX.

So when Jesus assured his disciples, *“Not one sparrow is forgotten in God’s sight.... Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows”* (Luke 12), I rather doubt he foresaw my Civic, as it rounded a turn of the Mystic Valley Parkway, tragically striking a sparrow perched mid-lane. Was God really watching that one, or was it perhaps forgotten, obscured by the unfathomable complexity of our modern world?

Watched?

Like others sharing the sidewalk, I kept my eyes fixed firmly ahead, focused on my destination. But the erratic motions of the woman striding toward me caught my attention. As she approached, I saw her hands held breadcrumbs which she was tossing toward the curb. If not for her, would anyone have noticed the knot of excited sparrows flitting in time with her step? Was God aware of them?

While keenly aware of “my doubts and fears,” I find hope in Jesus’ assurance of God’s providence. Sparrows, never forgotten, both live their days and die under God’s watchful eye. Divine presence is all around. Tragedies occur, grace abounds, for us as well as for sparrows. None of it is hidden from God, who values us all.

*“When songs give place to sighing, when hope within me dies,
I draw the closer to Him, from care He sets me free;
His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.”*

-Phil Braudaway-Bauman
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January 27, 2021

Spirit Level

*A spirit level is a tool used to indicate how parallel or perpendicular a surface is relative to the earth.
A spirit level gets its name from the alcohol inside the levels.*

Apply a spirit level to my mind
and the bubble rarely centers inside its frame

The past cannot be revived
and the future is unborn
yet I obsessively recall them forgetting
the present is the place of new beginnings

The instrument I use to keep myself on my axis
is still in its developing phase
but the dance goes something like this
one foot in the muck
the other in mid air

For an instant I am a fragile, mobile bubble
balancing in the spirit level’s center
until the freshness of the next moment arrives
and I begin again

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Streamers by **John Bisceglia**,
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January 28, 2021

Grace of God's Light

*We do not at all understand the
mystery of grace – only that it meets
us where we are but does not leave us
where it found us.*

This quote Anne Lamott quote speaks to me directly. The grace of light has come to me, passing through my mind right to my heart and soul, many times when I needed it the most. It has also roused the light within me, opening faith, love, and belief in myself and others, by giving these messages: you're not alone, you have what you need, you can do this, I am with you.

Light comes in many forms, not by trying to make it happen, but often in unexpected ways, and each time it is a gift.

Photo by Keith Curry Lance,
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January 29, 2021

When I was 26, my beloved Grandma Libby and I walked for blocks on a summer day admiring nature. My heart was breaking as I watched her fade with dementia, and I knew this would be our last walk together. She stopped and turned to me with her loving face and said, "I will never forget you." Immediately, I felt surrounded by light instead of grief.

In 2013 I woke up terrified in the dark, trapped in a heavily meshed anchored bed, called a Posey bed. I clawed desperately, struggling to escape until my strength evaporated. I didn't know I was at Craig Hospital after a severe traumatic brain injury. After a while, seeing a glimmer of light shine through a window comforted me and I fell asleep. I'll never forget the feeling of being imprisoned in darkness. Nor will I ever forget the presence of light; the feeling I wasn't alone and God was with me.

Two years ago, at the Albuquerque Zoo with family, I noticed a young, tough gang-looking couple, proudly carrying their baby girl, pointing at giraffes with glee. Dressed in worn clothes, covered with tattoos and hauling limited baby supplies, they appeared to be rough on the outside, but tenderly held their precious baby with a light of love. I said, "She's adorable and looks like both of you." Their faces lit up with joy, they shared enamored details about their little treasure, and then sauntered away. My own gnawing fears that day were erased in that moment, and memories of that young family bring light in my heart.

This pandemic can feel like being broken open, with fear, worries and stress. The grace of light manifests in unexpected ways, when we open our hearts to let it in. Letting go of expectations of how life, now or in the future, should be, allows us to take a pause, breathe and see the presence of God in nature, in people of all kinds, and from within.

I'm grateful for the presence of light in my life, and treasure the times it renews my faith, gives me strength and builds connections. I try to share this with others and hope it works at times for them. Light is meant to be spread wide and far, starting from within and reaching out around us. Grace is a gift from God, that "does not leave us where it found us."

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Quench my Thirsty Spirit

The talks with Mom as she shares a revelation, and it hits home for me,
Hearing softness and love in my dad's voice, turning my idea of him into
something else,
Having perfect-weather days, where I can have the sun beating down on my
head, drinking it in,
The welcoming quality of some group members, telling me they notice me and
offering a connection.
These are things that quench my thirsty spirit and show me grace.

Making a new friend, even within Covid, and discovering a bright light in her
spirit,
Using old things in new ways, and sharing successes with others, as we fumble
along with it all,
Getting better at hearing the fear *and* loving it, reassuring myself I am here for
myself,
Learning how to take one step at a time, and the grace that allows it to manifest.
These are things that quench my thirsty spirit and show me grace. Amen.

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January 30, 2021

FLAT JESUS

These Gifts of Grace symbolize the
volunteers on the Stewardship Committee,

Who in turn symbolize the volunteers
throughout the church,



Collages by **Rick Kron**

Who in turn symbolize the volunteers of the
thousands of organizations that are performing
good works throughout the world.

Grace abounds.

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January 31, 2021



FIRST CONGREGATIONAL
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST · BOULDER



Photo by Pedro Silva

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