

Sunday Column: A Community of Grace Where Every Person Belongs

Week 1 – Living Our Vision through Grace and Belonging

Faith Behind Our Vision (*Theological Themes*)

- God's love at work before we recognize it – Prevenient grace
- Every person's God-given dignity – The image of God (*Imago Dei*)
- The church as a community formed by grace – Ecclesiology
- Love expressed through care and the pursuit of justice – Christian ethics and Wesleyan social holiness

“At Girdwood Chapel, we envision a community of grace where every person belongs.”

What do we mean when we speak these words as our church's vision? We may agree with them, but each sentence deserves time and attention. Words such as grace, belonging, and neighborliness express beliefs about God. They also ask something of the way we live together.

Over the coming weeks, I will reflect on our vision in this column, one sentence at a time. I want to name the theology within these words and explore it through the life of Girdwood Chapel. These reflections will prepare us for a seven-week message series beginning in January. I hope you will bring your memories and questions into this conversation, including places where our practices have yet to catch up with our hopes.

We begin with grace. First John reminds us that our love is a response to God's prior love (1 John 4:19). In the Wesleyan tradition, *prevenient grace* names God's loving activity before we recognize it or respond. God does not wait for us to understand the faith, find a church, or learn how to pray before reaching toward us. When we meet someone, we encounter a person God already loves.

The Christian belief that every person bears God's image belongs beside this understanding of grace. Genesis describes humanity as created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26-27). Human dignity does not depend on someone's circumstances or what they can contribute. Our welcome acknowledges a worth that already exists. This changes the way we understand our place as a church: we are people who have received grace and are learning to extend that same generosity to others.

I think of the Girdwood Food Pantry, which has a home at our church and has grown in response to the needs of our community. The food pantry operates under Turnagain Community Services (TCS), for which Girdwood Chapel serves as fiscal sponsor. Terry Sherwood, its director, has devoted considerable time and effort to sustaining this work alongside volunteers from our congregation and the wider community.

As volunteers serve, they also learn. Meeting people and hearing their experiences can challenge assumptions about who needs food assistance and why. Someone we might initially know only as a person coming for food becomes a neighbor whose circumstances deserve to be understood. We begin to recognize how little that first encounter tells us about the whole of their life.

This learning matters to our faith. It is possible to offer help while still carrying judgments about the person receiving it. Grace gives us room to acknowledge those judgments and become willing to change. As our understanding grows, so can the way we serve. We become more attentive to whether someone feels comfortable asking for assistance, whether our words protect their dignity, and whether our practices reflect what our neighbors have told us they need.

For me, this is part of what it means to be a “community of grace.” Those offering care are also being formed through the encounter. We need the patience, correction, and understanding that relationships can bring. Our neighbors’ experiences can teach us something about our community that we would otherwise miss.

The pantry’s work also brings us into questions of justice. Isaiah connects faithful worship with sharing bread with the hungry and loosening the bonds of injustice (Isaiah 58:6-7). When people cannot reliably obtain enough food, their hunger asks something of our shared life. Providing food addresses an immediate need. Listening helps us understand the barriers that keep that need recurring and consider what further action may be needed. Challenging the stigma surrounding food assistance is part of this responsibility. People should be able to seek food without humiliation or pressure to participate in church.

In our Wesleyan tradition, holiness grows through life with others. Love of God calls us to take our neighbors’ well-being seriously, including the conditions that make daily life difficult. Food pantry ministry gives us a place to practice that love and learn what the pursuit of justice requires here.

“Every person belongs” reaches into our worship and decision-making as well. A person may be greeted warmly and still wonder whether their questions or ideas are welcome. Belonging deepens when their voice can influence our shared life. We need to ask whose experiences we hear regularly and whose we have yet to understand.

I read this first sentence of our vision as a commitment we are still learning to keep. Our food pantry volunteers’ willingness to serve and learn gives us a place to begin. Where has knowing a neighbor changed an assumption you once held? What might that experience teach us about becoming the community of grace we envision?