

VALUES FOR OUR
LIFE TOGETHER



Part Three: Appreciation

*A Chat for Faith Teams
Accompanying the Devotional Series
“G.R.A.C.E. Values for our life together”*

By The Rev. Dr. Walt Lichtenberger

NOTE to Faith Team Leaders: This Faith Chat is the third in a series of five that feature Christ-centered values for living with others in community. It contains a variety of options allowing its use either at a monthly or even weekly gathering of a Faith Team. Faith Team leaders are encouraged to use bits and pieces as they see fit. The goal is to have a meaningful conversation that is supportive and allows participants to explore and deepen their faith. By design, there is more material than could possibly be used in a single session.

Gathering (15 minutes: 0:00-0:15)

Coming Together - (12 minutes: 0:00- 0:12)

Introduce yourself around the table. Share your name and something about yourself that others may not know.

Light a candle and invite God's Spirit to be present.

Opening Prayer: *Ask for a volunteer to pray the following...*

Gracious God, help us in our learning to be kind, inquisitive, and responsive to your grace. Make us aware in our listening and speaking that you have gifted each of us with wisdom and experiences to share. Give us the courage that we need to welcome change and transformation. Through Jesus Christ, amen.

Introduction: (3 minutes: 0:12- 0:15)

On the coffee table in my church study, I have a small bowl of Jelly Beans. Should you ever come to visit, you are welcome to help yourself to your favorite flavor. These sweet treats are more than a sign of hospitality; they are one of the implements in my ministry tool bag.

A decade ago, I adopted the practice of passing a bowl of Jelly Beans around at the end of meetings that I ran. Everyone was welcome to take a Jelly Bean for each blessing for which they were grateful. Appreciative Inquiry research, which my friend Dr. Ken Olson introduced to

me, inspired the practice. When folks share an appreciation for the contributions of others, it fosters a creative and supportive environment that is better able to solve problems and face challenges.

Paul begins the book of Romans with words of thanksgiving to the entire community of Christians there. However, unlike elsewhere in his letters, Paul has never met these believers. In Corinth, Paul likely encountered a few of the exiled Jewish Christians from Roman, such as Prisca and Aquila (cf. Romans 16:3,) but since he had never been to Rome, the rest of the community was unknown. Yet, he greets them with thanksgiving.

Although sharing elated greetings at the start of a letter was a convention in letter writing of the first century, Paul's appreciation is more than a nicety (which the apostle withholds when he writes the Galatians, cf. Gal. 1:6) - it is an embodiment of the relationship Christians share in Christ. Connected to the grace of God, there are no strangers in the gospel. Therefore, with gratitude, Paul writes to his fellow believers as though they are already "family."

This Faith Chat will hold up the value of appreciation. When we share our thanks for the lives, kindnesses, and contributions of others, we recognize not only the life-giving connection that we have with them in God's love, but we are better able to recognize the blessings of God's presence in other's lives and our own.

Back to my bowl of Jelly Beans... As fun as passing sweet treats at the end of a meeting is, the practice has taken on a spiritual significance. Naming blessings and sharing appreciation for each other do more than build relationships and generate a positive working environment. It recognizes that each of the blessings which we share comes from God. God is active in each of our lives, giving us an abundance from which we can share with others. Appreciation celebrates God's presence in each and every person.

Engaging God's Word: (10 minutes: 0:15- 0:25)

Reading God's Word: (5 minutes: 0:15-0:20)

Romans 1: 7-12 (NRSV)

“To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed throughout the world. For God, whom I serve with my spirit by announcing the gospel of his Son, is my witness that without ceasing I remember you always in my prayers, asking that by God's will I may somehow at last succeed in coming to you. For I am longing to see you so that I may share with you some spiritual gift to strengthen you— or rather so that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.”

For those who are using this Faith Chat for more than one session, you may choose either to repeat the verse above or choose one of the alternate options. Use the same questions below to guide your reflection upon each of these sayings of Jesus.

- “I urge you, brothers and sisters, to keep an eye on those who cause dissensions and offenses, in opposition to the teaching that you have learned; avoid them. For such people do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the simple-minded. For while your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, I want you to be wise in what is good and guileless in what is evil. The God of peace will shortly crush Satan under your feet. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.” Romans 16:17-20 (NRSV)
- “For 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. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life. But more than that, we even boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation.” Romans 5:6-11 (NRSV)

- “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience. Likewise, the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but that very Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. And God, who searches the heart, knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit[e] intercedes for the saints according to the will of God.” Romans 8:24-27 (NRSV)

Responding to God’s Word: (5 minutes: 0:20- 0:25)

What stands out for you in these words from Paul to the Christians in Rome?

What initial questions emerge? What is confusing or hard to grasp?

How does it make you feel?

What does it teach us about our relationship with God? With others?

How does it challenge you?

What do these words teach you about appreciation?

Exploring Connection (45 minutes: 0:25- 1:10)

Choose one or more of the following options to generate group discussion. For those who are using this Faith Chat over multiple sessions, you might want to do one of the supporting Bible stories in Option A for each session.

Option A: Appreciation Abounds in Jesus-Stories

Choose one of the following stories from the gospels in which Jesus exhibits the value of grace. If you are using this Faith Chat for more than one week, you might want to select a different story for each session.

I. A Widow’s Gratitude.

At the time of Jesus, widows regularly fell through the social safety net. The patriarchal system did not allow for women to hold property or possessions in the same way as men. When a man died, the care of his wife was given over to their male children or another family member. This social inequity led to many widows becoming destitute. Even in the best situations, these women had limited access to financial stability and were not able to exert fiscal agency.

Read the story and use the questions below to discuss.

“Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

-Mark 12:41-44 (NIV)

Questions for discussion:

Where do you see the value of appreciation displayed in this Jesus-story? Where do you see a lack of appreciation?

What is the role of gratitude in this story? What lessons does gratitude teach? Why is it important for the followers of Jesus to be grateful?

What is the interaction between God’s grace and appreciation?

How does this story relate to **Romans 1: 7-12** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

II. Anointing Jesus’s Feet

The story of anointing Jesus’s feet is told in all of the gospels (see Matthew 26: 6-13; Luke 7: 36-50; John 12:1-8). In Matthew, Mark, and John, the event occurs during Holy Week, days before Jesus’s crucifixion, and is a preparation for Jesus’s burial. Luke locates the story earlier in the gospel and connects it with forgiveness and hospitality. In all the accounts, it is done by a woman and is a sign of affection and care for Jesus. In John’s gospel, Jesus himself will repeat the act as he performs this loving gesture for each of his disciples. In the ancient, sandal-wearing world, the washing of feet was done by servants and was a sign of hospitality for guests.

Read the story and use the questions below to discuss.

“While [Jesus] was in Bethany, reclining at the table in the home of Simon the Leper, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very expensive perfume, made of pure nard. She broke the jar and poured the perfume on his head. Some of those present were saying indignantly to one another,

“Why this waste of perfume? It could have been sold for more than a year’s wages and the money given to the poor.” And they rebuked her harshly. “Leave her alone,” said Jesus. “Why are you bothering her? She has done a beautiful thing to me. The poor you will always have with you, and you can help them any time you want. But you will not always have me. She did what she could. She poured perfume on my body beforehand to prepare for my burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”

Mark 14:3-9 (NIV)

Questions for discussion:

Where do you see the value of appreciation displayed in this Jesus-story? Where do you see a lack of appreciation?

What is the role of gratitude in this story? What lessons does gratitude teach? Why is it important for the followers of Jesus to be grateful?

What is the interaction between God’s grace and appreciation?

How does this story relate to **Romans 1: 7-12** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

III. Praises in Gennesaret

In Mark’s gospel, the healing story of the demon-possessed man in Mark’s gospel is dramatic. A man roams the graveyard uncontrollably. He is tormented by demons within his mind and body. After Jesus heals him, the man wants to accompany Jesus on his journey across the Sea of Galilee. But, Jesus has other ideas. He instructs the man to return to the village and tell them what God has done. Jesus invites the former demon-possessed man to express his appreciation for God’s deliverance.

In the second passage, we see Jesus returning to the same place in Gennesaret. Notice the reaction of the townsfolk and what can happen when appreciation is shared.

Read the stories and use the questions below to discuss.

“As Jesus was getting into the boat, the man who had been demon-possessed begged to go with him. Jesus did not let him, but said, “Go home to your own people and tell them how much the Lord has done for you, and how he has had mercy on you.” So the man went away and began to tell in the Decapolis how much Jesus had done for him. And all the people were amazed.”

Mark 5:18-20 (NIV)

“When they had crossed over, they landed at Gennesaret and anchored there. As soon as they got out of the boat, people recognized Jesus. They ran throughout that whole region and carried the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. And wherever he went—into villages, towns or countryside—they placed the sick in the marketplaces. They begged him to let them touch even the edge of his cloak, and all who touched it were healed.”

Mark 6: 53-56 (NIV)

Questions for discussion:

Where do you see the value of appreciation displayed in these Jesus-stories? Where do you see a lack of appreciation? How has appreciation changed the villager’s welcome of Jesus?

What is the role of gratitude in these stories? What lessons does gratitude teach? Why is it important for the followers of Jesus to be grateful?

What is the interaction between God’s grace and appreciation?

How does this story relate to **Romans 1: 7-12** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

IV. Rising with Gratitude

Recall, healing stories in the gospels operate on at least two levels. There is the miraculous healing of someone who Jesus encountered which serves as a sign of Jesus’s power to both the person involved and to all who hear the story. Their lives forever change for the good. There is also the gospel proclamation that God chooses to engage the lives of those who are hurting and broken.

In the ancient world, folks interpreted illness and disability as divine displeasure. Someone must have sinned. Those who were ill or broken in mind/body/spirit were excluded from fully

participating in the worshipping community. A culture of holiness and purity precluded their entry into the holy spaces where God resided in glory.

Jesus's boundary crossing behavior challenges such purity. Through his interactions with those who were labeled "outsiders" and "sinners," Jesus demonstrates God's willingness to engage humanity where it hurts the most. God boldly enters where life is messy and reestablishes connections. No one stands outside the love and mercy of God. This is cause for great celebration and appreciation.

Read the story of Jesus's teaching moment with his disciples about prayer. Use the questions below to discuss.

A few days later, when Jesus again entered Capernaum, the people heard that he had come home. They gathered in such large numbers that there was no room left, not even outside the door, and he preached the word to them. Some men came, bringing to him a paralyzed man, carried by four of them. Since they could not get him to Jesus because of the crowd, they made an opening in the roof above Jesus by digging through it and then lowered the mat the man was lying on. When Jesus saw their faith, he said to the paralyzed man, "Son, your sins are forgiven." Now some teachers of the law were sitting there, thinking to themselves, "Why does this fellow talk like that? He's blaspheming! Who can forgive sins but God alone?" Immediately Jesus knew in his spirit that this was what they were thinking in their hearts, and he said to them, "Why are you thinking these things? Which is easier: to say to this paralyzed man, 'Your sins are forgiven,' or to say, 'Get up, take your mat and walk'? But I want you to know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins." So he said to the man, "I tell you, get up, take your mat and go home." He got up, took his mat and walked out in full view of them all. This amazed everyone and they praised God, saying, "We have never seen anything like this!"

Mark 2:1-12 (NIV)

Questions for discussion:

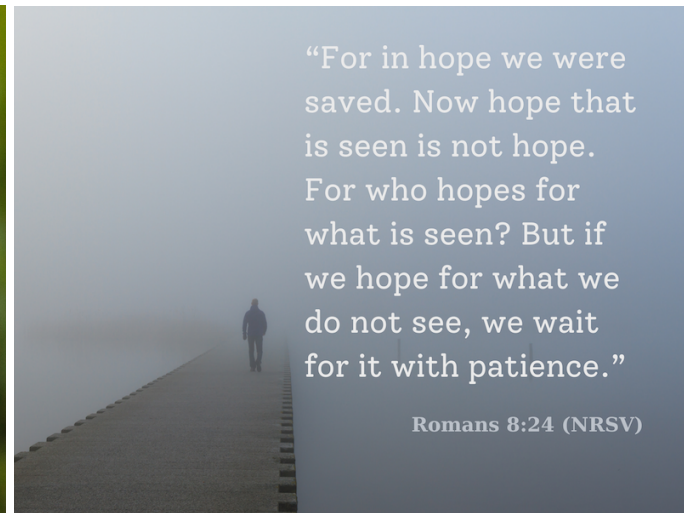
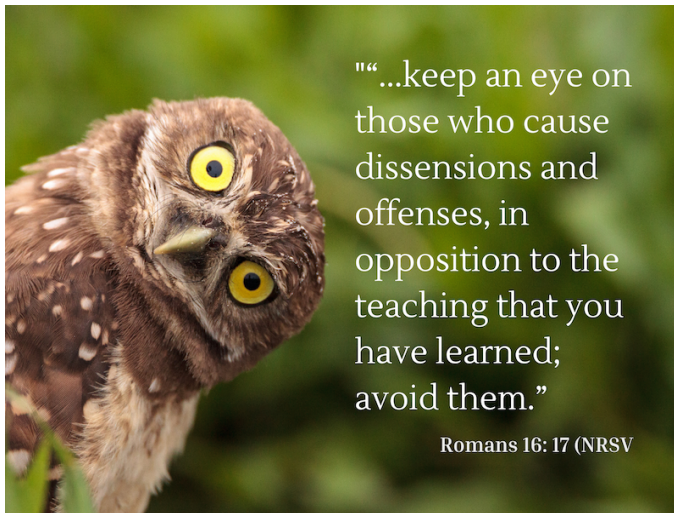
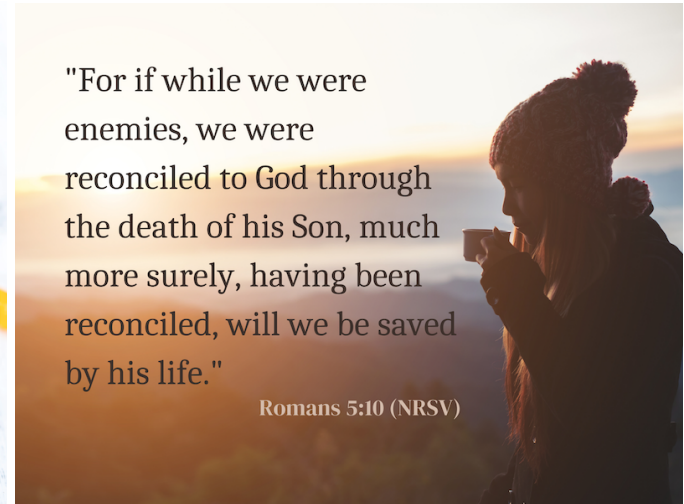
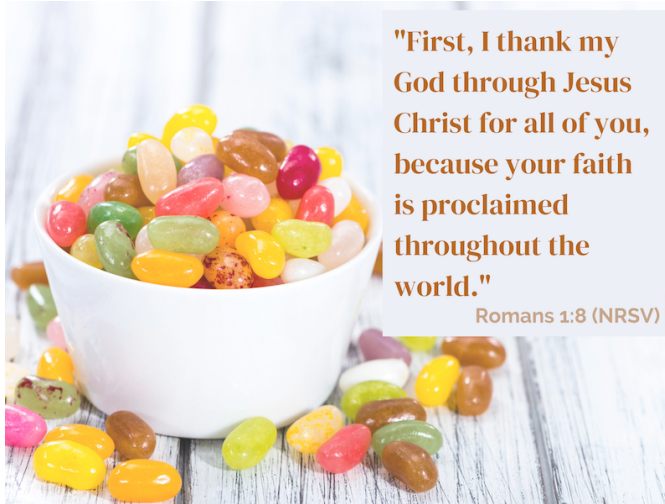
Where do you see the value of appreciation displayed in this Jesus-story? Where do you see a lack of appreciation?

What is the role of gratitude in this story? What lessons does gratitude teach? Why is it important for the followers of Jesus to be grateful?

What is the interaction between God's grace and appreciation?

How does this story relate to **Romans 1: 7-12** (or the guiding verse chosen for this session)?

Option B: Inspirational Images



Discuss the Inspirational Images above.

How do you connect or disconnect with them?

In what ways do the images convey appreciation? How might the value of appreciation be either supported or not supported by what is contained in the image?

What other images would you choose to go with these scripture texts?

Option C: Gleaning Wisdom from Experience:

Look at the following questions through the lens of your Faith Team. Allow for recurring foci and conversations of the group to guide your conversation.

Where do you find yourself when it comes to appreciation? Do you apply this value easily? What situations or persons make sharing appreciation easier or more difficult? How do you show appreciation?

How do you feel when others appreciate you and what you have done? Would you rather give or receive appreciation? Why? What are both important for your well being?

Where might God's presence be found in the sharing of appreciation? What good can God create in an appreciative environment? How might God help transform unappreciative situations?

What does being a disciple of Jesus mean for you? How does this identity shape and influence the ways you relate to others as you show appreciation?

Option D: “Romans and countrymen, thanks”

Throughout this Faith Chat series on Christian values, Paul's letter to the Romans will be used as our biblical foundation. This epistle, which is the longest of all the correspondence attributed to Paul, has long been read as a theological treatise on matters of faith that were of critical importance to the reformers (including Luther) of the sixteenth century. Recently, scholars such as Douglas Moo, have suggested other lenses through which we might access the wisdom and import of this letter.

It is helpful once again for us to remind ourselves that the Book of Romans is a letter, written by Paul to a group of Christians in Rome. Although Paul had not been to Rome at the time of writing, he was very experienced in both Jewish and Gentile culture and those cultures found themselves clashing among the Roman Christians.

Although both factions (Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians) were at odds with each other, Paul addresses his letter to both of them and begins with powerful words of appreciation. Paul is grateful for their witness to the life of Jesus, even if it is somewhat compromised by their infighting. Through the doorway of gratitude, Paul introduces himself and seeks to build a relationship with the

community as a whole, inclusive of both elements. More than a diplomatic approach, Paul's approach is grounded in the unfailing love of Jesus.

Paul appreciates and remains thankful for the grace that God shows to the whole creation in the life of Jesus. This gratitude influences not only Paul's relationship with God but the way he chooses to interact with a Christian community that he has yet to visit.

Questions for discussion:

What do you think of Paul's appreciative tone established at the beginning of the letter for the Christians in Rome? How does this set the proverbial stage for what follows? In what ways does Paul's appreciation early on allow him to be sterner later in the letter, sharing truths that might be uncomfortable for both factions?

What role does "modeling" play in this discussion? If Paul expresses appreciation for all the Christians in Rome (Jewish and Gentile), what behaviors might this encourage within the community?

How might the value of grace allow for appreciation especially within a Christian community that is in turmoil?

How might appreciation foster hope?

Sending (15 minutes: 1:10- 1:25)

Sharing of Appreciation for Learning (5 minutes: 1:10-1:15)

Ask each person to name a single insight or learning that they will take home with them.

What can you do differently going forward based on these insights/learning from this Faith Chat?

Bringing Our Time to a Close (10 minutes: 1:15-1:25)

Salt, Light, and Prayer: Go around the table a second time. Ask folks to share three things: 1) something positive from their week; 2) something with which they are struggling; 3) someone who is in their prayers.

The Lord's Prayer: Close with saying Jesus' prayer together (choose a version as a group)

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done, on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours, now and forever. Amen.

-or-

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever and ever. Amen.