

Today’s lesson is read from 2 Thess. 1:1-4, 11-12

**Hear from Paul’s letter:**

Read 2 Thess. 1:1-4, 11-12

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

**“Thanks be to God”**

Let us pray:

O Lord, let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart be acceptable, pleasing, and perfect in your sight, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Intro:

One of the hardest parts of my life has been to keep up with friends. It’s not that I’m bad at making friends it’s just hard to find those types of friends that will always be there for you and feed that need for what I call spiritual friendship. Spiritual friendship is more than acquaintance, more than a contact you put in your phone; it is an ongoing relationship in which we nurture one another's souls. In spiritual friendships, divine affairs and human affairs intersect in such a way as to create moments of grace.

Although the Apostle Paul uses different language, he often speaks of spiritual friendship. When he refers to Christians he has met in his missionary journeys, he calls them brothers and sisters in the faith. He expresses deep appreciation and affection for these spiritual friends, and so do I.

When Kendall and I celebrated our wedding, we invited these friends to join our family to surround us so that our joy might be multiplied. And when the time came to grieve the loss of my father, we were grateful for those friends who offered a listening ear. I am grateful for these spiritual friends, but the spiritual friendships I have had in my life go back well beyond my memory. From the time I was born, there were folks surrounding me who shared in forming me spiritually.

There were many folks in Blythewood, who taught me Sunday School, led my youth group, loved me when I was unlovable. They were patient with me when I was intolerable. They were graceful toward me when I had been anything but graceful to them. In word and deed they taught the scriptures, they taught me about Jesus, they stirred in my heart a hunger for Jesus Christ. All of these folks are spiritual friends, because they fed my soul.

As we observe All Saints Day today, we celebrate the great cloud of witnesses whose bodies have left this world, but whose spiritual friendships have shaped and molded us. They have become part of the communion of saints that we celebrate when we recite The Apostles' Creed. All Saints Day is a day to remember those who have entered eternal rest; and for me it is a day to give thanks for spiritual friends, living and dead, who have brought me to this place. As 17<sup>th</sup> century Poet Alfred Lord Tennyson said in his poem *Ulysses*, "I am a part of all that I have met."

Each of these spiritual friends wrote a memorable story upon my heart, and from their writings the story of my life is told. I am who I am today because of who we were together yesterday.

Let me introduce you to some of my spiritual friends. At age five with Mrs. Cindy Brown, who taught my kindergarten class and who was my Vacation Bible School teacher in the summers. In her Bible School classes, we re-created the ancient villages of Galilee on a sand table with old-fashioned clothes pins painted to represent villagers. She told the stories of Jesus, and they came to life on that table. We sang songs like *This*

*Little Light of Mine, He's Got the Whole World in His Hands, I'm in the Lord's Army, and Father Abraham Has Many Sons.* And I still remember those songs still to this day.

Meet Mrs. Diane Walker who would gather our sixth grade Sunday School class around an old TV monitor and played The Andy Griffith Show Bible Study Series. Through watching the many characters in the town of Mayberry I would learn about the love of Jesus, the presence of the Holy Spirit, and the vitality of scripture. She let us know how wonderful God's love was for us, read the scriptures for us, and prayed with us.

I want you to know about Mark King, my youth pastor. He could play a mean piano and started a youth band, which had four guitar players, and I was one of them. In an old van, he took the youth group all over the eastcoast to sing and to learn and to be together in Christian fellowship. He had the patience of Job and a passion for ministry. We all knew that he loved the Lord. And he always encouraged us to never shy away from asking questions about the Bible. That's really what led me to do what I do today.

These are three of the spiritual friends who gave me deep roots for my faith in Jesus Christ. Some of these friends are still alive today, and some are part of the church triumphant.

The Apostle Paul knew that he, too, was shaped by his spiritual friendships. In his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul gave thanks to God for his spiritual friends at that church in Thessalonica. He singled them out for praise because their faith was growing abundantly. Few things in life are more powerful than a person of growing faith. When someone is growing in faith, their life bears fruit such that you recognize God at work in them. Faith that inspires is faith that is constant, daring, and enduring.

Like Ryan and Sarah Kyper who were members of east cooper Baptist church I frequented in Mt. Pleasant Charleston. Ryan was a mentor of mine at The Citadel and became a civil engineer and he married the pastors daughter, Sarah who was a school teacher. After the Citadel, Ryan wanted to go to parts of the world where people didn't have fresh running water and wanted to drill wells there so that they could. After several mission trips to South America, this couple heard a call to the full-time mission field. Leaving behind the security of good jobs, they signed up to go wherever the Lord might send. Last I heard they were assigned to Haiti, where they drilled wells in rural villages bringing fresh, clean water, and they offered the water of life in preaching, teaching, and witness. Their faith inspires me because it is a daring faith--a faith that surrenders comfort and predictability so that they might be available for the Lord's use. I've lost touch with Ryan, but still, our spiritual friendship inspires me because their growing faith makes me a better follower of Jesus Christ.

Like all growing faith, the Kypers' faith is rooted in extravagant grace. Ryan and Sarah are quick to tell you that in those early short-term mission trips they received far more than they gave. In the lives of the Haitians they visited, they experienced grace upon grace as they heard the testimony of people in poverty who had profound faith in the provision of God. Their faith is born of God's extravagant grace. Grace precedes all things, including faith itself, because grace is God's initial act of love. Grace is perfectly embodied in the gift of Jesus Christ, and grace is often clear in the witness of spiritual friends who in their lives write memorable stories of grace and faith.

One of the greatest stories of grace and faith was written on my heart early in my life. In the neighborhood I grew up in there was a cul-de-sac and it was perfect for

kickball, basketball, baseball, you name it. Me and a few other kids would play together every day after school. Some days we played in the creek catching crayfish and running through the woods. Other days we would ride our bikes over to high-class Windemeire and skip rocks next to the golf course.

One day boredom got the better of us, and we went scavenging for golf balls in the woods. Once we had enough golf balls we started teeing off in a clearing with a 5 iron my friend Blake Larebe got from his dads garage. At the time we were not aware of the danger. For the most part, we were so lousy at hitting that we did no damage until one went rouge and hit the car of Mrs. Linda Garner, one of our neighbors driving by. Once we hit her car, she screeched to a stop, got out of the car and calmly approached us, the culprits, with a bag in her hand. We didn't even try to run. We were caught red handed dead in our tracks ready to face the judgment.

Then she said, "You gave me something, so I wanted to give you something," and with those words she placed an orange in each of our hands.

Even as kids we knew we had been touched by an angel. We had received extravagant grace, and it was transforming. For the remainder of childhood and now even as an adult, I am here talking about her remarkable act of grace. I now know that this was just a good woman down the road walking in the footsteps of other saints before her, fulfilling her divine call to be a spiritual friend, writing the story of extravagant grace and growing faith on my heart. I am grateful that she answered the call walk in all those saints footsteps and to be a spiritual friend to me and my friends.

Spiritual friendship is a gift from generation to generation. Each generation receives extravagant grace and a divine call to share that grace with others. Cindy,

Diane, Mark, Ryan, and Linda witnessed to their growing faith by their extravagant grace. Through them God has called me to witness to my faith. All of us are eager for role models, especially children and teens. They emulate those around them. They need spiritual friends.

We see children's hunger for a role model when they play dress up. It is a precious sight indeed to see a little girl who has painted her face with Mother's makeup or a little boy in Dad's oversized coat or a child standing in shoes that look like canoes on the tiny feet. There is nothing children want more than to grow up to fill those shoes. When an adult walks down the street, children will often try to put their feet right in the footprint of that adult.

I am grateful that spiritual friends walked in front of me and left giant spiritual footprints. The next generation is counting on you and me for extravagant grace and a growing faith. They need us to make large footprints so that they can follow in our steps.

On All Saints' Day I'll breathe a prayer of thanks for those spiritual friends who have gone before me, and I'll pray that you and I leave footprints of grace and faith large enough for the next generation to follow.

**Will you join me in prayer. Dear Lord, you lived a life so large that none could miss it by caring for those people thought to be so small as to be insignificant. Grow my faith, Lord Jesus. Grow my spirit so that I may live a life of grace. Grant me opportunity to leave a spiritual footprint large enough to be seen and deep enough to matter. Amen.**