

**Unexpected Grace and God's Got the Wheel:
March 24, 2021**

The cross that I wear...
During the season of Lent...
And many times...
During the year.

Was given to me...
By some friends...
At one of my first calls.

These are real nails.
The husband's grandfather...
Tore down... one of his barns.

This barn was one of those...
Big Old Red Barns...
That you see everywhere...
In Wisconsin.

Anyway... he tore it down...
And carefully... meticulously...
Removed all the square nails...
From the barn wood.

Square nails date back...
To the 1800's...
He gathered them...
Polished them...
Soldered them together...
Into the shape of the cross.

This family gave me...
One of the crosses.

Which had even more significance...
Since the grandfather had since died.

This was an important gift.
And I valued it very much.

One year...
Just like every year...
We held a service...
At that church...
On Good Friday...
In the evening.

That night...
A woman came...
Whom I did not know.

She was not a member of the church.
She was not someone from the small town...
Because everybody knew everybody.

She looked disheveled...
And a little rough...
Around the edges.

She sat through the whole service...
She was actively engaged...
Throughout the night...
Worshipping God...

Afterward... she came up to me...
And said she needed help.
Some financial assistance.

I told her to hang on a minute...
As soon as folks cleared out a bit...
We would figure something out.

Then... impulsively...
Somewhat abrasively...
She looked at me...
And said... give me that cross.

And honestly... I don't know what happened.
It was like I was being moved...
By some external force.
Maybe even the Holy Spirit...

Anyway... I immediately...
Took the cross off...
And hung it around her neck.

In that moment.
I could see...
She was simultaneously confused and filled...
She broke down...
Into tears.

Then later... I went...
And told the family...
What had happened...

How the gift they had given me...
That their grandfather had made...
Seemed to really impact...
The life of a woman...

Who needed something to hold onto.
Who needed a little hope.
Who needed a sign... a symbol...
That someone cared about her.

They were very gracious.

Eventually... they gave me another one.
Which I turned around...
And gave to a seminary student.
Who needed to feel the presence...
Of the church... as he studied theology.

Then... the family gave me another one...
And said... listen buddy.
This is a limited supply.
We aren't making any more of these.
DO NOT GIVE THIS ONE AWAY.

And so... it's the one I wear now.
With much gratitude in my heart...
For the family.
For their grandfather.
For the opportunity...
These simple objects have given me...
To offer... to other people...
A sign of God's grace.

I know...
I am absolutely confident.
That you have a story like that.

You have a story of how God's grace...
Has unexpectedly... broken into your life.

You have a time...
When you have been a witness to...
The love of God at work...
Either through you...
Or toward you.

Like when you went on a mission trip...
And you helped other people...
You worked... and sweat...
And gave your time and energy...

And the people were so appreciative.

But the truth of the matter is...
you got more out of the experience...
Then those people you served.

Because...
When you witness the grace of God at work...
It changes your heart.

It makes you more open...
To the power of the Holy Spirit.

It gives you an overwhelming sense of humility...
Because what you have done...
Seems so insignificant...
And yet...

Somehow...
By the power of God...
Your work is Transformed...
Your simple act...
Has become an impactful...
Moment of Grace.

It's what we call...
A Ministry of Presence.
Sincerely being where you are...
And doing what you do.

And making room...
For God to do something powerful...
In the midst of relationships.

You don't have to have special knowledge.
You don't have to have the right words to say...
Or the right theological stance...
You don't even have to be...
A good person.

We just have to be present.
And allow God to work in us...
And through us.

And it's funny...
How sometimes...
We think the work...
Of the church...
The work...
Of the people of God...

Somehow depends on us.
And what we do...
And our own significance.

It does not.

It all depends on God.
It always depends on God.
It is the work of God...

And the results...
Are completely dependent...
On God.

Which should make us feel incredibly good.

If we really trust...
That God is at work...
In our lives.
In our church.
In our world.

Then... we can do what we do...
With the confidence...
That if we are in line...
With the simple love of God.
And the simple message...
Of the gospel.

That God will do something.

Isaiah 55:10-11... says...

As the rain and snow...
Fall from heaven...
And do not return...
Without watering the earth.
And making it bud and flourish.

Providing seeds to the sower...
And food to eat.

So God's Word...
That proceeds from God's mouth...
Will not return to God EMPTY...

But will accomplish...
Exactly what God purposes.

But often...
Our egos gets in the way.

We say... yeah yeah...
I know God loves me.
I know that the work is dependent on God.
I know that the church is dependent on God...

BUT...

It can't be that easy.
I have to do something...
To make the world right...

I have to do something...
To make sure our church is right.

I have to do something...
To make myself right.

In just a few days...
We are going to relive the story of Jesus.
How he enters Jerusalem...
How he is put on trial.
How he is beaten and tortured.
How he is nailed to a cross.
And left to die.

And we will hear his words.
I am thirsty.
Today you will be with me in Paradise.
Eli Eli Lema Sabathani.
My God, My God...
Why have you forsaken me.

And he will say...
It is finished.
He will bow his head.
He will die

And in that moment...
It is finished.

All the expectations of the law.
All the misconceptions we have...
About our own ability to earn our salvation.
All our denials about our sinful nature.

And.. all of our doubts.
About worthiness...
And right and wrong.
And how can God love me.

In that one moment.
It is all finished.
The law is fulfilled...
The work is done.
The price is paid.

Whether we acknowledge it or not.
Whether we like it or not.
It is finished.

Because Jesus did it all.
In that one moment.

So that's it... right.
I mean... the majority of the time...
The reason we are offended...
Is because...

We think that we need to do something.
We think that we need to say something.
We think that we are so important...

That we hold the truth...
And the knowledge...
And the wisdom.

And if people would just listen to me...
Everything would be alright.

So. Let me say this as clearly as I can.
It's not about you.
It's not about me.

If we believe in God.
If we truly follow Christ.
Then we know.
It's all about him.

And it's ok...
That I'm not the cat's pajamas.
That I'm not all that important.
That my significance...
In the big picture...
Is not very significance.

It's ok.
Because God loves me.
And that makes my life worth living.
That gives me meaning beyond this moment.
That gives me eternity.

All I need to do...
Is embrace the gift...
That I have been given.

Brant Hansen ends his book...
With a story...
About his family...
Driving all over God's creation.

First... they go to the grocery store.
His wife runs into the store...
And back out to the car.

They go to a friend's house...
And drop something off.

They get on the highway...
He drives 65 in a 55...
And he's pulled over...
And gets a ticket.

And after all this running...
His daughter who has been...
In the backseat...
This whole time.

During this entire trip...

Takes her thumb out of her mouth...
And says... Dad... where are we going?

Then he writes...
She wasn't the least bit offended...
With my lack of communication.

She's a child.
And children are, by nature, humble.
They don't have to know everything.

What she did know, though,
Mattered infinitely.

It's the distinctive line between a life of
mistrust, stress, exhaustion, anger, bitterness,
And ceaseless striving,

And a life of contentment and rest.
And not just for her
but for all of us who know that,
ultimately, we're not in control

SHE KNEW WHO WAS DRIVING.

She knew, and still knows,
That the one who is driving... **LOVES HER.**
That makes all the difference.

Right. How beautiful is that.

God is in control. God is driving.
We are not in charge. God is.
And when we humbly submit our lives...
To the will and way of God.

Then we know.
Wherever God takes us. It's going to be ok.
Because God loves us.

And nothing can change that.

God's love and peace to you all.