

**ABUNDANT, AMAZING GRACE** Testimony – Rev. Victoria Schlintz

2 Corinthians 1:3–11; 12:7b–10 Clovis Mem'l. UMC Sermon 10/8/06

If I say “God is good,” will you say, “all the time?” If I say “all the time,” will you say, “God is good.” God is good... All the time...

God’s grace is more than sufficient! It is amazing and abundant. This is my testimony. I’d like to share my testimony of grace in the midst of the trials of life—in my case, diagnosed 2 ½ years ago with a degenerative fatal disease. And my prayer is that this testimony will help you see the grace of God in the midst of anything you might go through.

I have what the Apostle Paul would call a thorn in the flesh. We don’t know what his was. Countless explanations for Paul’s thorn in the flesh have been offered, from incessant temptation, dogged opponents, chronic maladies (such as eye problems, malaria, migraine headaches, and epilepsy), to a disability of speech. We don’t know what Paul had, but I know my thorn by the name of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis, ALS, or Lou Gehrig’s Disease (because he was the most famous person to have it). It’s a degenerative neuromuscular disease, causing demise to voluntary muscles progressively until death when it affects accessory breathing muscles.

I’m in my fourth year of symptoms of a disease with a textbook life expectancy of 2-5 years--although I wouldn’t put the boundaries of a textbook on God’s grace. (Can I hear an “Amen”?) And I’m living as though I have no tomorrows and as if I have every tomorrow, (one of the many paradoxes that I can live in more fully as I live with dying) and it enriches my life and ministry.

The Apostle Paul says God reminded him, ‘My grace is sufficient for every need.’ Paul knew that incredible, amazing, outlandish grace in the midst of whatever he had to go through, and I know it too. Again, my prayer is that you may know and live in that grace for all of *your* days.

I know you know about “thorns.” We all have them. They are a part of living. However big, we all have some kind of thorn today—a disease, condition or malady; an “issue” of some sort. Every treasure has thorns, in the sense of the prickling aspect we don’t totally understand or know how to deal with. Life has its thorns.

Jesus prayed for the thorn to be taken from him in the Garden of Gethsemane, but then wore a crown of thorns up the hill to Calvary. Paul says he was traveling life’s journey in awe and wonder, joy and fulfillment, and then—the thorn.

I was finally diagnosed with my big thorn six days before coming to my current appointment in Atwater. It didn’t seem like the timing was very good. But when is the time to hear you have a terminal disease? The same week

that I moved from my home of 20 years, my church, my friends, and the community resources I knew, I discovered that what I thought was a back problem, causing a foot problem, turned out to be a disease with no known cause or cure--not even hope of chemotherapy or radiation.

Time has, however, been a blessing. I have since learned more about hope of my slow progression. I walked until two weeks ago--that's amazingly slow progress over 3 years after first symptoms. Will you say, "Praise God!" with me? "Praise God!"

Two weeks ago, however, was the last time I walked down the aisle in our sanctuary. A parishioner blessed us with the fine carpentry work of a ramp and a wheelchair pulpit. Last week we altered worship, just enough to accommodate a pastor in a wheelchair. I miss walking, but not the tremendous energy consumed by the effort, because of all the muscles I'm now functioning without. By God's grace I will continue pastoral ministry as long as possible. May God bless our entire church on the journey.

I experience the disability of my disease daily--showering and dressing are the most difficult things I do. Yet I am still fully in ministry, serving and loving God, and even renewed my Registered Nursing license last year. I believe in miracles. And, though it may not be through healing this body, the Lord has already performed miracles in my life, and in the lives others.

I would like to share at least four ways in which God has written grace beyond this disease on my soul, and impacted the ministry I've been called to.

The first gift of God through this disease is **PERSPECTIVE**. How easy it would be to go through life day to day with very little perspective--to see things narrowly, through feelings at the moment, experiences of the past, or reactivity to the insignificant things of life. Living with dying can make perspective less narrow, less temporal, less "me" centered--maybe closer to God's perspective. Clearly the phrase "don't sweat the small stuff" has new meaning. So what if something wasn't fair or someone was rude or a minor tragedy happened. In light of dying, I can more fully live because the little things have less power.

We can all realize our mortality and renew our perspective. We can be aware of where there is pettiness and insignificant indignation. We can stop if we start in on something that pushes our buttons--pause and say "it doesn't really matter, does it?" As perspective changes, relationships can be blessed or restored, and the work of God through us can be kingdom-building. As we renew our perspective, to be more like God's, we become more loving, more forgiving, and become more and more disciples our Lord can use for

transformation, renewal and healing, for ourselves and those around us.

So, “let go and let God” is one of the works of our Lord’s more than sufficient grace in the midst of trials.

My second gift in this disease has been **VALUES CLARIFICATION**. When the doctor gave me the diagnosis, she said you should consider what you want to do with the rest of your life because this is it. She told me it would be perfectly justifiable to go on disability and write my memoirs or get my scrapbooks in order. I was blessed to be able to say, without hesitation, that I am doing what I need to be doing with the rest of my life. And my husband of over 30 years graciously supports me in this. My life is about ministry and I believe God has & will honor the commitment to continue in it as long as I can.

What are you doing with the rest of your life? Do you feel, like I do, like Esther, here in the here and now for such a time as this? Are you making a difference for others and honoring God by doing what you are doing with your life right now? As we clarify our values, we realize that all time is precious and should be used to bless us and others and honor God. How we use our time and what we do can either edify or distract, build up or tear down. It is a good and right thing, always, to examine our lives and ask ‘What does what I do and say reflect of my values?’ and, more importantly, of the values we reflect of Christ within us.

A third impact of this disease has been a clearer development of a **THEOLOGY OF SUFFERING**. I’ve preached a sermon series on a theology of suffering, but let me try to give you, today, the short version: God didn’t do it. A common theology of suffering shows itself when someone, usually not a believer, comes upon a crisis and blames God. “Why?” they ask; and proclaim that there must not be a God because a good God wouldn’t let this happen. There are also those who believe that God’s sovereignty means that God is in control so it must be God that gives us our tragedies and diseases, to refine or get us in line, or punish us. The Pharisees asked of Jesus, “Who sinned, the blind man or his parents, that he has this affliction?” “Neither,” Jesus responded and added that God could, however, be glorified through this. I don’t believe God did it. God is sovereign, but allows free will and natural law, so that we are not automatons, but in relationship. By our free will, we will be able to bring on lifestyle diseases because of the choices we make, or there will be suicides and homicides, abuse, and other results of evil deeds. Because of natural law, which allows wonders and amazing things such as the incredible beauty of the ocean and the sustaining life of water, we can also have hurricanes and floods and wind and rain that damage. Or we can have

tragedies such as airplane and automobile crashes. I was very young when I learned the first natural law of physics: that two masses cannot occupy the same space at the same time; and if they try, there will be calamity. God can intervene, but normally God sees us *through* rather than *around* our trials.

God didn't do it. God didn't say, "I'll give you ALS to grow you." God doesn't need to do that and I don't believe it's God's desire for me to have ALS. But God can work mightily in the midst of it. God can use it in my life and the lives of others.

The kids at our church get it. One day there was a mix up about where the youth were to meet and eight kids sat in my office. Five neighbor kids came by and I asked if they wanted to join the youth group that night. As they sat waiting (hanging out) in my office, a neighbor asked one of our kids, "Does your pastor have a broken leg?" She answered: "No, she has a disease." He asked, in surprise: "Does God do that to pastors?" She responded: "God didn't do it to her, sometimes things happen, but God will help her deal with it." (I thought they were handling it quite well, so I stayed quiet, realizing how much they'd listened to theology of suffering and grace that just comes about naturally because of our life together.) Then a neighbor kid said, "Oh, I get it--like getting hurt on your bike, nobody makes it happen, but you still get hurt." They looked at me and asked if it hurt. "No," I said, "it just doesn't work." The oldest said, "Is that grace--that it doesn't hurt?" "Yes," I replied, "one of the many graces God gives you just when you need it most." Painlessness was my grace; others may know a different grace. Then the youngest child in my office pointed to the candy dish, "Can we have one?" A new subject.

The fourth way in which this disease has reached the depths of my soul, and the lives of others, comes with a clearer understanding of **GOD'S GRACE AS MORE THAN SUFFICIENT**. Paul says the thorn wasn't removed and then he realized God's grace was sufficient.

Grace is mentioned 170 times in the Bible. It's especially spoken of in two ways. One is God's unmerited favor of salvation. I've heard it described that justice is getting what we deserve, mercy is not getting what we deserve, and grace is getting what we don't deserve--eternal life.

The other way grace is used in the Bible emphasizes gifts of God for fullness in the life of the believer. God's "enoughness" or sufficiency enabled and empowered Paul in his weakness. I am weak in my suffering; you are weak in your trials; but God can use our surrendered brokenness or blessings for God's glory--to equip us for ministry, to show us our need for one another, and to use our suffering to reveal God's sufficient and abundant grace.

I, unashamedly, ask you to pray for me, because I need it, but also because you need it; and I need to pray for you. We weren't made for solitude. We need God. We need one another.

One of the gifts of grace for me, is those who have stood by my side from diagnosis until today. God blesses us with those who come alongside. At a community event at our church last year one of our members introduced me to a neighbor. The neighbor looked down at my leg to see what was wrong. The parishioner said to her, "Our pastor has a disability, but we use our gifts, so she can use hers," and offered me her arm so I could walk. A great grace is that we do each use our gifts, so others can use theirs.

Even the children get it. Last Children's Sabbath, after rehearsal for the youth-led worship service I said, "Okay, I think every kids has a part and we have all the parts covered." A 7-yr-old raised her hand and asked, "Who gets to help the pastor walk?" She had seen the liturgist do that and thought it was an important role in worship. She was right, I'd forgotten. And she "got" it—the grace of God in us allows us to each use our gifts, so others can use theirs.

God also uses people to grant grace in lovely and unexpected ways as we commit to continue on the journey for Jesus' sake. This summer I was blessed by the clergy of the California-Nevada Annual Conference of the United Methodist Church, to receive two amazing blessings at Annual Conference, to receive a certificate that says, "Victoria Schlintz is called by God and claimed as a colleague..." And last month, I received an amazing stole, with a detailed account of its "Spirit creation," and signed by hundreds of pastors in the California-Nevada Annual Conference. Grace...pure grace.

Such grace comes from my congregation as well—ministers of grace who come alongside in this ministry. One such account happened last year. At confirmation class, after our discussion on grace, we went out for a pizza lunch. While waiting for the pizza, one of the kids asked me (what seemed like 'out of the blue'), "Pastor Victoria, Is there a cure for your disease or are you going to die?" The youth got quiet, waiting for my answer. I prayed quickly and began to talk about grace for all that we might go through in life, grace from God, for me in this disease and for whatever any of us might go through. The next day, I received a handmade card from a 12-year-old:

"The grace of God is always with you...(it said on the cover; and inside...)  
Dear Pastor Victoria, Thank you for all the things you have taught me.  
Whenever I'm around you, I feel safe. Whenever I feel bad, you turn my frown into a smile. You have been an awesome pastor to me! I will never forget your beautiful smile and your wonderful spirit. I know that you have a great gift, and I'm very happy for you sharing it with me, my family, and our congregation.

You are awesome! I love you very much!”

God’s grace is more than sufficient. It is abundant and amazing. The Jewish Seder, which Jesus celebrated in what we know as the Last Supper, has a moving litany of blessing and thanksgiving that lifts up God’s gifts to the people. It goes like this:

O Lord, our God... if you had only delivered us from Egypt,  
“dayeinu” (*pronounced die-YEAH-nu*) it would have been enough.

If only you had given us the Torah, the prophets, the Temple...  
“dayeinu” it would have been enough.

This morning, would you join me in echoing this prayer, by responsively saying  
“*dayeinu, it would have been enough.*” If only you had given us the Gospel of Jesus Christ

“dayeinu” it would have been enough.

If only you had allowed us to be ministers for the sake of the Gospel

“dayeinu” it would have been enough.

If only you had given us the privilege of blessed relationships

“dayeinu” it would have been enough.

God’s grace is more than enough; it is abundant and amazing!

I Thess. 4:13 says we do not grieve as those who have no hope—our faith tells this, and I am a witness to it, in living or dying. I’ve always been dying—I’m just more aware of it with this disease. And I’ll always be living, that’s the gift of eternal life. Would that we all live as though dying and die as those living, eternally. The paradoxes of life are more real because I have been faced with a terminal disease. Living with dying, I can be more alive. As I die to this life, I come more alive to the next. As I look beyond this life, I can gain a perspective for living this life. As I lose my life, I gain it.

This is my testimony. God is my (and your) creator, redeemer and sustainer, through the past, present, and for all the future—in this life and the next, because of Jesus Christ my (and your) Lord and Savior, forever and ever.

God is good... All the time...

Let us pray: Precious Jesus, how grateful we are for the gift of yourself, which would have been enough, and yet you bless us with so many other gifts. Almighty God, you are grace sufficient, and that would have been enough, but you are life abundant for now and eternity and may we always be moved to know, and live in, your outlandish love and amazing grace. In the name of the Lord of the Universe and Lord of our Lives, now and forever, Amen.