

# *Wading River Congregational Church*

## SERMONS IN PRINT

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### 1 Chronicles 16 "Grace And Gratitude"

#### 1) *God's Grace to David and Paul*

King David was not the greatest of men – he was a failure as a husband and a father, and at times a treacherous leader – but he was also a man of deep gratitude for the way God had given and forgiven him so much. When you read his Psalms, you begin to grasp the heart of a man of whom God said *"he was a man after my own heart."* That does not mean David earned God's grace by his grateful heart, but just the opposite: David was thankful that he had discovered and experience that even a deeply flawed man could *"give thanks to the LORD, for he is good."*

So a very characteristic narrative and Psalm of praise accompany the bringing of the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem, the City of David. David is established now as king over all Israel, with his capital in Jerusalem, meaning there was now a nation rather than a confederation of tribes; and he determined that the worship of the LORD God of Israel would be placed at its center. David knew this was all by grace – he, a youngest son, a shepherd, was king; the Ark was back from its Philistine capture; there was peace on all sides. David's Psalm makes God's role clear: *Give thanks to the LORD, call on his name, Make known among the nations what he has done...*

*Remember the wonders he has done,  
Ascribe to the LORD the glory due his name.*

A millennium later, Paul the Apostle, converted from a persecutor of Christians to their first great theologian by meeting Christ on the road to Damascus, affirmed that "by

*the grace of God I am what I am."* He understood fully that *"it is by grace you are saved through faith, and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God."* The wonder of God's grace – that he shows favor to those who do not deserve it - rings through Scripture from beginning to end, and its human result is always giving thanks, is always gratitude. Here are the first two of the "three Gs" that everyone needs to learn – *grace* leads to *gratitude* (the third step is that gratitude leads to *generosity*, but that's a story for another day).

#### 2) *Grace To Us*

What of us? Have we experienced grace and been moved to gratitude? There are many avenues by which grace reaches us. First and most important, of course, is that by coming to know Jesus Christ we encounter the God of grace whom he called *"Abba, Dad."*

Until we grasp that God has treated us better than we deserve – because every one of us needs forgiveness, restoration, redirection, regeneration – and have accepted that the channel of grace to us is Jesus, we will never be truly grateful to God. Instead, if we are the religious type, we will become *moralists* who think that God rewards good people (of whom we are fine examples!) – or at least he should, and we are upset when he does not! Being saved from that sort of self-deception, and all it can lead to, is achieved by the work of Jesus in giving himself for us, and accepted by faith - which we discover is itself a gift of God! So we are doubly graced, that

Christ should die for us and that we should be granted faith to embrace him.

But we also experience God's grace in the mundane details of life. He cares not just for our eternal salvation but for our daily living and flourishing. So we can find ourselves saying, with King David, *"Lord, you have assigned me my portion and my cup; you have made my lot secure. The lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; surely I have a delightful inheritance."* *"You prepare a table before me... you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows."* Of all people in all times and places, you and I have more reason than most to say such things. But are we grateful?

And are we grateful to God for *the people* through whom much grace flows to us? On Memorial Day weekend, it's right to remember with gratitude the people who have given everything so that we can enjoy our "pleasant places." It's customary to remember men and women whose lives were lost in military service – a tradition that began at the end of the Civil War when southern women began to place flowers on the graves of Confederate soldiers. "Decoration Day" was proclaimed in 1868, and soon adopted by many states – New York being one of the first, in 1873 – but was not finally adopted as a national holiday until 1971.

So Memorial Day is a day to remember all those who have gone before us not only in the military, but in police and fire departments and other public safety agencies. Tomorrow, as Chaplain to the Wading River Fire Department, I will read the names of over 100 former department members, the bell will toll for each one, and a white carnation will be placed on a Maltese cross in their memory. This morning we will also place a wreath and make other acts of remembrance around our flagpole, to honor those who have fallen and who have served in our armed forces.

These are highly appropriate ways of expressing gratitude, but how many other ways do we rarely think of? How about aid

to our injured veterans? Since 9/11, over 5,500 American troops have died in Iraq or Afghanistan, but over 32,000 have been injured – many in ways we have seen little of before thanks to IEDs that explode beneath personnel and vehicles – so there are many amputees and paraplegics among this war's victims. What would it take to supply their needs? What would it take for our country to develop a clear-sighted political will to end these conflicts?

How can we help to move our culture out of its addiction to complaint rather than gratitude? How can we change our ambition to "succeed"? That takes many destructive forms today: young people who are emotionally crushed before they reach 18 because they did not make a varsity sports team or get accepted to a top-40 college. Graduates who think the world is waiting to make them "masters of the universe" only to learn that a Bachelor's degree won't open many doors now. Parents who so dearly want their children to flourish that they overwhelm them with "improving activities" from the time they are 5 years old, and wonder why when they reach High School, kids are already exhausted and just want to drop out.

Middle class families who so want the big houses, the good cars, the fine vacations, that they mortgage their futures and their children's futures, and constantly find themselves disappointed that life doesn't turn out as they had hoped. Chronic disappointment is a disease that is eating too many people, and it so readily turns into resentment. Many observers have pointed out that American public life is more and more dominated by the "politics of resentment" at every level.

So if things don't turn out well for us, we need someone to blame. So it's this President, or the last one, or the Democrats or the Republicans, or Wall Street or the illegal immigrants... or locally it's the School Board or the School Superintendent or The Community Journal, or the Town Board in Riverhead or Brookhaven, or maybe its all

Albany's fault..! Resentment between groups and parties and movements makes for anger and destroys all thought of "the common good."

And the only antidote to this poison is gratitude. We can either resent that we have not "got our share," or we can be grateful for what we have. We can either complain that the world should treat us better, or we can be thankful for the grace of God. This is a deeply *spiritual* issue for all of us, because it touches the deepest places of who we are – or who we think we are – and if that inner place is wounded and angry, it poisons all our relationships, all our goals, all our social life, all our community involvement, all our politics – and of course most profoundly, all of our faith life.

Resentment, in the end, is aimed at God for not treating us as well as we deserve, and letting other undeserving people prosper. What we need, on Memorial Day or any other holiday, is to do some serious remembering of who we really are, where we came from, how far God has brought us, how little we deserved it, how many times we have almost driven our lives off a cliff – all the twists and turns of life that have brought us to this place and time with the great level of health, wealth, opportunity, freedom that we have.

God has been good to us. Either we believe that, and live out the gratitude it commands, or decide that the world – or our spouses, our children, our parents, our employer, "the government" – has treated us badly. Which thought dominates our minds, our souls, our spirits? Resentment or gratitude? When we finally sort that out before God, we may find that life looks a lot better, and we are more at peace, because we understand what grace means to us, and why it leads to gratitude.

Let us pray...