

Grace Notes – Two of them

Colleagues,

For this first week of Easter some Grace Notes. The texts come from two ThTh subscribers. Number 1 is from Edwin Boger, a college biology prof in Worcester, Massachusetts. Number 2 is from Paul Marshall, the Episcopal bishop of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. I was once blessed to have both of them as students, Edwin at Valparaiso University, Paul at Concordia Seminary. The blessings continue—as you will see.

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

GRACE NOTE #1

[Edwin Boger's introductory note to ES: ThTh 94 speaks of two kinds of reflecting on the part of Christians. One is reflecting-T (as in thinking) the other is reflecting-M (as in a mirror). Here's one for reflecting-M. The story-teller is Brenda Seefeldt . She's a Youth Evangelist in the Washington D.C. area and also is a substitute school teacher. She wrote this to her parents, Bill and Merrlyn, students of yours and friends of mine way back in Valpo days. They sent it on to me and now I on to you. Enjoy.]

Here's the story of Frank. It's the best way I know of telling what has been going on.

Frank Brinson IV died March 9, 2000 in a car accident. He was 18 years old. He was one of "my kids." He was one of God's kids too—and left quite a legacy because of it.

I must first begin with how I met Frank. I was subbing at my

school and had a much larger than a regular freshmen boy in my PE class. A large, threatening-looking guy complete with cornrolls. But he was fine in class that day and the next couple of times I had him. He was always smiling—didn't fit the look.

One day I was doing lunch duty and there was Frank wearing a black t-shirt with 4-inch white letters which said "God's Grace" across the front. That was it. Nothing clever. No artwork. I squealed out to Frank, "What is that?" To which he gave me his brief testimony. A year ago he was locked up in juvenile detention after being gang associated. His grandmother died and spoke some life words into him. He and his mother decided to move to northern Virginia to get a new start. Which he did with God's help.

No one knew what Frank left behind in Pittsburgh. They knew him as a good football player (his passion which he put extra effort into), a good student, someone who constantly talked about his bright future (he was always forward-thinking), and someone who always smiled.

When news of his death spread that next morning at the school, a pall hit. Nearly the entire school. The halls were full of weeping and walking wounded. "Not Frank!" were their cries. The football team put on their football jerseys from storage. Football players broke down in sobs. Students used ink to make makeshift tattoos with Frank's football number (21) on their bodies. And everyone talked about his smile. Even students who didn't know Frank were visibly upset because he had once smiled at them. It was a dark day.

What started happening next is what is amazing. Only a God-thing.

The next day the front page of the local paper had a picture of Frank's sisters wearing the "God's Grace" t-shirts he had made

for them. Teenagers had their own "God's Grace" t-shirts made. And in the chain-linked fence in front of Gar-Field High School, two seniors took styrofoam cups and spelled out "God's Grace RIP 21." Not "Frank RIP." Frank has become known as "God's Grace." This made the front page of the local paper, again. Gar-Field High School has been marked by "God's Grace."

The viewing was the worst I had ever been to. Hundreds of youths congregated in front of the casket. Lots of crying. Some wailed so loud they had to be removed from the room. That set off a chain reaction to the rest of the mourners. Some did not have the strength to stand. Some passed out. Most would come and look, leave the room, go outside and scream and yell, only to come back in again and start the cycle over.

The screams and wails were "Why Frank?" "Why not drug dealers?" "Why not criminals?" "Why Frank? He was so good." "That's not Frank (open casket). He's not smiling." "I don't want to leave him."

Hundreds of teenagers devastated by Frank's untimely death. Hundreds of teenagers having to face their own mortality. Hundreds of teenagers facing death in such a personal way for the first time. Hundreds of teenagers wearing "God's Grace" t-shirts.

After the questions and the wailing, we would start to hear and overhear stories about Frank which brought laughter and joy (a breakthrough from the intense mourning). The stories always included his smile. From the stories we would hear, "I'm going to live my life like Frank did." It was an undercurrent from all the grief, but it was starting.

The family borrowed a church to have the funeral at. It seated 1400. Around 1300 streamed in to the funeral. Lines and lines of teenagers dressed up (a very untypical look for the student

body) crossed the street from Gar-Field High School to this church to attend the funeral. More than there were for the viewing.

Everyone was seated for the funeral. You could hear the muffled cries and the occasional wail. Joy had not come in the morning yet for these students.

To start off the funeral, the pastor decided to play the song, "God's Grace." A song Frank played over and over again. The wails erupted. Students poured out the church doors to get out of the sanctuary. Some students fainted again. For a long moment, it looked like the mourning would never end.

But then the preaching started. And was it anointed! The challenge was sent out clearly and directly, "If Frank could come down from heaven and talk to you all one last time, he would tell you all to get saved...God's Grace. What better legacy to leave behind... You all need to pick up your lives and win like Frank did. You need to carry on and live your life with God's Grace."

A very specific and clear altar call was given and before the pastor was even done, James stood up. James was one of Frank's friends. Others stood up following James. In less than a minute, over 1200 people stood up to commit their lives to Christ. The spirit of death lifted and joy came rushing in.

Now we will see how these commitments are lived out. James is committed to living his life changed. Some will fall along the path and be eaten by the birds. Some will fall among rocky places and spring to life quickly but not have much soil. Some will fall among thorns. And some fell on good soil and will grow and multiply. (Mark 4:3-8) If what fell on good soil grows, that is 300 students of a 2500 population at Gar-Field High School.

Frank's short life of 18 years, his shorter life as a Christian and his 13-month life as a Gar-Field student influenced 1200—for starters. What is most interesting is how he did it. He didn't preach. He didn't hand out tracts. He didn't start a Bible club. He didn't use a high-tech audio visual production.

He was a good student. He was polite in class & didn't push his limits, even if the teacher was a substitute. He worked and got good grades. He played with that little extra on the football field. He smiled at everyone. He talked to everyone. And he wore a simple t-shirt that gave witness to his life.

A definition of grace is being accepted before you are acceptable. Frank received that and never forgot it. Now hopefully 1200 others will never forget it.

GRACE NOTE #2

“Grace in the Airport” by Bishop Paul V. Marshall *[The text comes from the April 2000 issue of DIOCESAN LIFE, a monthly publication of the Episcopal Diocese of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. As Bethlehem's bishop Paul recently visited Swaziland, a tiny African country smack-dab in the middle of the Republic of South Africa. Several parishioners from his diocese work at an AIDS hospice there. “Under their guidance,” he said, “I sought the face of Christ among the suffering and those who care for them.”]*

Here is Paul's text—

Can lost luggage be an act of God? Do angels disguise themselves as porters? I do not know, but the possibilities are intriguing.

With my body screaming in several places after fourteen hours that are best left undescribed, I got off the plane in

Johannesburg to find my main piece of luggage lost. Turtles are built for survival, not speed, and thus I do not travel light. In my carry-on I had only a partial change of clothes because of the room taken up by my other survival tools. I thought bitterly of the old joke about the Concorde: breakfast in Paris, lunch in New York, baggage in Bermuda.

The gift came in the form of a young man whose name tag said "Daniel." He zoomed in on my wounded and fretful appearance and offered to help me. Daniel spoke English, but in accents that were difficult for me to understand. I gave him a brisk "No, thank you" and moved on.

He followed me! This was not good news to a city boy. He persisted even when I dodged into a telephone area, only to discover that I had no idea how to work the South African telephone system. He cornered me and asked me somewhat urgently if I wouldn't please let him help me, as it was his job to help strangers.

I started to realize how much I had mentally locked my car doors because Daniel was black. Like many other people of good will, I thought I had "gotten over" that.

Out of guilt I let him guide me to the shuttle bus, and found myself apologizing for my resistance on the grounds that I was upset that I had lost my luggage, was generally disoriented, and had never been to South Africa before.

His response was odd. He shoved an open hand to me, almost at eye-level, and said something I could not understand, and said it again when I did not respond. I bent my head close to his, and he said very slowly for the third time (by the grace of God a rooster did not crow), "Wel-come." I took his hand gratefully.

It would have been enough if this were the end of it. For some

strange reason the shuttle bus kept on not coming. This left us standing together, and we did what males of our species do instead of conversing: we asked each other questions. In response to something I asked he said, "If you are going to have a good visit in South Africa, you will have to be patient." I said, finally getting it, "Just like you've been patient with me?" Somehow proper grammar does not seem necessary during an epiphany.

In my first hour in the country, Daniel had opened me to experience and to human community when I had been focused on disorder and inconvenience. It took them four days to get my luggage to me. In the meantime, up in Swaziland I learned what it was like to wash out one's underwear each night, and what it is like to have "only" two shirts in places where some people feel fortunate to have one.

As I write this I remember that "Daniel" means "gift of God," a fact that may set the indoor record for slowness of perception. All of this took place as described, and perhaps gives us something to think about during this Lenten season in what will be Africa's century, a time when Africa will be recognized worldwide as a gift of God to many.

ANNOUNCEMENT

The board of directors of The Crossings Community, Inc. meets once a year. At this year's meeting in June, one full day—June 24—is set aside for a Crossings Practicum. That means a Show-and-Tell [8:30 a.m. – 4:15 p.m.] about the Crossings model for Bible study and for linking the Word of God to daily life. All are welcome to come to St. Louis and participate. There is no charge for the event. Five dollars to cover lunch costs will be appreciated. A printed brochure for the practicum exists. To get one, tell the Crossings office what your snail-mail address is

and we'll send it to you. You can access Crossings by email info@crossings.org or by phone: 314-576-0567.