

Graduation Sunday, May 22nd, 2011

by Jeff Neuman-Lee, pastor Prince of Peace Church of the Brethren

This message is in the form of a letter to our two high-school graduates.

Dear Jess and Lynn,

There are three things I want to say to you.

1. You are so loved.
2. Love the truth.
3. Be the community of love.

1. You are so loved.

You *are* so precious. Each of you is fully and completely beloved by God.
Like rare colored diamonds forged in the pressure of the earth millions of years ago . . .
Like an ancient, one of a kind, bronze statue discovered at the bottom of the sea . . .
Like your first glimpse of your new strength when you overcome a fear . . .
You are so precious.

You *are* so beautiful. Each of you radiates the life God gives.
Like a flower set into the desert that stretches and opens up to the sky . . .
Like the wet dew on the sunny morning after the rain rises in a gentle mist . . .
Like the hawk perched statuesque on the branch studies the field and then glides off . . .
You are so beautiful.

Hear these words of Scripture:

Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have obtained access to this grace in which we stand; and we boast in our hope of sharing the glory of God. And not only that, but we also boast in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.

You are loved.

You are not loved because you are perfect, because you are not.

You are not loved because you are good, because at best you are only pretty good.

You are not loved because you have skill, because you can stand and speak boldly, because you are clever in school, or because you smile and get others to enjoy the moment with you.

You are loved because God has first loved you and poured His love into your hearts. You glow with that love. So what if you fail? You are loved. So what if you succeed? God is with you.

If there is perfection, it is God love making you perfect.

If there is good, it is that love of God bubbling up within you so you may rejoice in the love you give.

If there is skill, or boldness, or smiles, it is the sign of God's love growing and maturing within you.

You are loved.

2. Love the truth.

There once was a father whose daughter was disfigured when she was young. As a toddler she pulled a pot of boiling spaghetti over on her and was burned. The father blamed himself and could never admit to himself that this had happened. The girl, of course, knew that her father was lying, but she also knew that he loved her. She played along with his lie.

Her life was difficult. In spite of the best intentions of people, people still did not give her the same welcome they would give others because she was so severely disfigured. She really needed the truthful honesty of her father so that he could help her to work deal with the inevitable problems that came from her disfigurement. But as he could not admit it to himself, he could not admit it to her, so he left her alone with the truth of her situation.

Hear these words from the beginning of John's gospel :

The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Later on in the gospel of John, Pilate, as he is speaking to Jesus, asks Jesus this simple question: "What is Truth?" Let's ask it with him: what is truth?

When we first hear of "truth" in John's gospel truth is inextricably linked with another concept which comes from the One who here is named *God the only Son*. That thing is grace. We think of grace as forgiveness for wrong doing, of God's gift of acceptance of us in spite of what we have done. Yet God's grace is more than this, it is in God's grace that all things are set right.

Hear these words of Scripture:

... since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God; they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness .

While it is and generally remains the human convention that righteousness must be found in obedience to God's law, to the eyes of faith in Jesus Christ, real righteousness is found in God's grace. The righteousness of God is God's way of being with his creation, it includes everything. So truth, which would seem to be a hard thing, like the law is a hard thing, is of God and found within God's grace.

Another way of putting all this is that to love someone or something is also to be in truth with the object of that love.

To love is to know what there is with truth. How else can love be love? Can love lie about its object? Never. Love seeks the truth about that which it would love.

You graduates are about to embark on a new chapter of your life. Make it true. Love yourself and stay in the truth.

There are plenty of myths and convenient stories out there which are not true. These myths and stories which bend the truth are dangerous to our souls and dangerous to our world.

They presently threaten the very life of this world. Look to see what is there. Test it. Talk about it. Stand firm in God's truth.

What ever you study, study loving the pursuit of truth. Relish your study. Study with passion. Love the truth.

3. Be the community of love.

There once was a girl who was alone. (It is the story of every girl or boy, all of us, for at least some time, will be deeply alone.) She worked in a cubicle in an office. The employers gave their employees the freedom to choose their own hours and so the girl came to work in the middle of the night and left just before most other people were arriving. She'd go home and fix her breakfast and quietly sit and eat it. She listened a lot to the radio and would sit by herself at that table listening to other people talk and other people sing. She closed the drapes during the day and watched old, recycled television all by herself.

The way it felt to her, her radio and her TV were her friends. They took the place of real people in her life. And so, she lived alone and by herself; but didn't quite feel that way.

One night, commuting to work she had a flat tire. Luckily she was on Colfax Avenue where there are tire shops every three or four blocks; but all the tire shops were closed and didn't open up until 7 am. There was a 24 hour restaurant open. It was the only choice she had if she wanted to get off the street. She walked in and sat at the counter. The cook walked up and said "what can I do **for you** tonight, my dear." And the girl broke down weeping.

Hear these words of Scripture:

Peter began to say to him, "Look, we have left everything and followed you." Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life.

Jesus promises his followers something which is utterly necessary and utterly substantial for all us humans: community. The community of Jesus is where people can be most human. It is, of course, made up of people who walk with each other through life. These are people upon whom we can rely and people who rely upon us. It is based upon a mutuality that continues through life like being a member of a family, a place where they know your name, a place where you know their names.

Those who follow Jesus do risk losing the community that they already have. Yet, the community of Jesus cannot obliterate any community which already is true community. The community of Jesus is a community that has pledged to be a community of love in a world at war. It has pledged to be a community of forgiveness in a world soaked in revenge. It has pledged to be a community of mutual support through the inevitable struggles of life. It is a community worth leaving one's old community for—or—it is a community worth attempting to transform one's old community into.

To be in such a community one makes choices, one sets one thing above another, one rejects some things. One seeks to be that loving, forgiving supporting member of that community and to be that member in all their life.

It is a community which can be of just two, a deep friendship or a marriage. It is a community which could be a small group or a stadium full of people. But it always takes more

than one person, and every relationship into which you enter can potentially be the true community of Jesus.

You graduates leave us physically. (Please know: within Jesus Christ you will always have community here with us.) You go to a world where many of the old structures of community have been disbanded. Included in these disbanded structures are what it is to be family. As I see it, it is to the advantage of our capitalist culture to brush aside other our allegiances and forge each of us as singular, individual consumers. You have the choice here of succumbing to the prevailing fashions of this culture, fashions which do not lead to true community but are devices to mask our failure to be in community with each other. Or you have another choice. Be the community which you have found.

Find others who will be the community of Christ with you.

You are loved. You love the truth. God has given you power to be in that community of Christ. Be that community of Christ and let others see it.

What is easier, to be alone or to be in community?

Community is difficult. But it is the truth of our humanity. It is our way of not really being alone, but being in the family of God.

So I ask you to hear these things:

1. You are so loved.
2. Love the truth.
3. Be the community of love.

With the fondness of your old friend,

Jeff Neuman-Lee