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SPECIAL FORCES

Comedian Bob Newhart used to have a routine in which he described his experience flying on a cut rate airline to Hawaii. He said this airline was the Grace L. Ferguson Airline and storm door company. He said the pilot came out during the flight and addressed the customers. He asked if they had any questions. He said to one man, "Yes, you in the back. What's that? I'm sorry I can't hear you over the sound of the engines. Oh, wait, it's all right, they've stopped now." The pilot ended by asking, "Have any of you ever been to Hawaii before?" When some said they had he responded, "It's kind of kidney shaped isn't it?"

He was being funny, at least that's what I thought until Laurie and I flew on that airline on our recent trip to Mississippi to visit Carissa and Michael. We flew from the town of Meridian to Atlanta as the first leg of our homeward journey. It wasn't on the Grace L. Ferguson Airline and Storm Door Company, but our airline may well be its cousin. The day before we came home we were in a grocery store when Laurie got a call on her cell phone from a Meridian number. We were with Michael and Carissa, the only people we know in Meridian, so we couldn't imagine who was calling. It was our airline. They informed us that our flight at noon the next day had been cancelled. Not to worry because they had another flight at 10:30 in the morning. We just needed to be at the little Meridian airport at 9:30. We dutifully reported the next day at the appointed time only to be informed that there was some uncertainty about our flight time because they weren't sure everyone had gotten the message. So we waited. At one point Laurie was approached by a gentleman who asked her what was causing the hold up. I guess that wouldn't be unusual except for one thing. The man was the copilot of our flight.

I found it rather unsettling that the flight crew didn't know what was going on and was asking passengers. Made me wonder what else they didn't know, like maybe what Atlanta looked like. I don't think it's asking too much of an airline that they know where they are going and how they're going to get there. We could say the same thing about the church, couldn't we? There are lots of churches around. Where is this one going? What are we trying to be? It is important to remind ourselves from time to time, and I felt that the beginning of a new year is a good time to think about that. What is the Anchor Church trying to be? Where are we going?

Do you remember the motor boats they used to have at Disneyland? I remember how excited I was when I found out I was actually going to be allowed to drive the

boat. I could see myself speeding through the water at daredevil speeds. But there was also an element of fear. What if I lost control and ran aground or collided with something? Why, I could be killed, or at least seriously damage the boat, which surely would lead to being killed by my parents. And then we boarded the boat. In my mind we launched to the sound of the band playing “Anchors Aweigh” and headed for the open sea. What a disappointment to discover no matter how much I opened the throttle that boat would go no faster than a sea slug. But the greater disappointment came when I found that the boat was on a track! You could turn the wheel all you wanted, but it would only wander a few feet to one side then would stop and keep going the same direction.

That was disappointing. At times I fear people have greater disappointment with their church. They have an idea of what it ought to be, an idea that keeps crashing into the rocks of reality. Others, perhaps, are even worse, for they have no hopes for the church to begin with. They’ve found church to be dull and irrelevant from as far back as they can remember.

Our military at times is faced with the need to have teams that operate as small units behind enemy lines. They are special forces. That's what the church is like. It is not an overwhelming invading force that overpowers the enemy with greater numbers. We are the few who are on the narrow path that Jesus talked about. We are the few, the humble, the Christians. We are a special force operating in enemy territory, constantly under attack. How are we to fulfill our role? In particular, we have to ask why this unit exists. Why the Anchor Church? What are we trying to do and how are we going to do it? Let's think about that today as we are early in a new year.

We seek to be:

PEOPLE WITH A SPECIAL BOND

1 Corinthians 12:12 says, “The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.” Verse 27 says, “Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.”

These verses tell us we form one body. It doesn't say we form one organization. A body is organic; its many parts share a life. That is true of us as well. Our connection to each other is not organizational in nature, it is organic. We share a life. We share the life of Jesus, the Spirit of Christ, and that is what ties us together.

A body is very different from an organization. An organization is something that people move in and out of depending on their interest and their usefulness to the

organization. Organizations shed people all the time. Can you say "downsize"? But a body doesn't downsize its parts. My body includes some parts that are less than attractive. My kidneys for instance are not something anyone is going to call lovely. Yet I would never want to part with them. I also have some parts that don't operate nearly as well as I might like. For instance, my eyes allow me to see, but they don't do it as well as they were designed. Our son-in-law, Michael, is a fighter pilot. He has the eyes of a fighter pilot. He can read signs I can barely see. My eyes in comparison are pitiful. They need assistance to be able to see clearly. So maybe they are not as good as other people's eyes and maybe they don't operate nearly as well as I wish they would, but they're my eyes and I have no desire to lose them.

How many perfect bodies are there in this world? There probably are none. Let's ignore for now the cultural ideal of how a perfect body should look and think about the fact that bodies that might even look great may in fact not be perfect. For instance, in our family we have some people whose bodies look wonderful, but they in fact aren't perfect. Laurie has something wrong with her body that some of you may not be aware of. We all know that the normal complement of kidneys for a human body is two. Laurie doesn't have two. She has three. That's just not normal. Her body is not perfect because who knows what else might not be right? Toby also has something off. When he was in college he started having problems with numbness in his left arm. He went to the doctors and they discovered the problem. He was working out for football and his trapezius muscle had gotten so large it was pinching a nerve that went to his left arm. Part of the reason that happened was that he had an extra rib on that side! Once again, who knows what else is in there.

Toby's and Laurie's anomalies remind me that we don't know what might be off about the rest of us. A study led by Chris Tyler-Smith of the Wellcome Trust Sanger Institute in Cambridge, England, recently discovered that the average person has 400 defects in his or her genes. Despite their imperfections we love our bodies and make the best of them as they are. The point we need to remember that our connection with each other is not organizational. It is not a matter of us being bound together because we have something in common or even because we are committed to the same goal. We are bound together by an organic tie. It's kind of like a family. We don't choose who is in our family, we are bound together by sharing the same life. And that's how we in the body of Christ are. There might be members that annoy or irritate you, but they are still part of your body.

People form groups for all sorts of reasons. Companies form to make a profit, teams form to win games, clubs form for all sorts of reasons. We recently went to

the model train show at the fairgrounds. We encountered people like those from the Zocal Model Train Club. They are dedicated to Z Gauge Model trains. I was amazed at their zeal and commitment. They spend hours creating model towns, hills, tunnels, people, cars and they are enthusiastic about their models. What binds them together is their common interest. That is a very breakable bond. Some relational friction, a power play in the club, a loss of interest in the hobby can all cause them to drift away. The bond in the body of Christ is not a common interest, it is the very Spirit of Christ living in each of us. We are as tied to each other in this body as my knee is tied to my ears. They are forever part of the same body. So are we.

PEOPLE WITH A SPECIAL FORCE AT WORK

This reality that we have this bond is going to require something powerful in order for us to be more than just a group of people who are unhappily chained together. Ephesians 4:31-32 tells us that we should "grace" each other as Christ has "graced" us. Grace is undeserved kindness. It is treating a person in beneficial way that the individual does not merit.

We just enjoyed spending a week with our daughter and son-in-law. Carissa made the point that Michael is so well suited to be a fighter pilot it is like he was made to do that demanding job. The fighter pilot image is of a sort of daredevil wild man, but the reality is rather different. A good fighter pilot has to be highly intelligent and extreme detail oriented. Michael fits that perfectly. While we were with them we spent time helping them hang pictures on their wall and putting up some curtains. Here Michael's attention to detail was obvious. He had his tape measure and his laser level out and measured things down to the sixteenth of an inch.

I would never have made a good fighter pilot. I just tend to eyeball things and if it looks good, I'm happy. If not, change it. I am bad with details. This comes into play in our lives, for I struggle with details. Little things like missing a deadline to extend our health insurance happen due to my inattention. That happened to us last month. This was my responsibility and I fumbled it. And Laurie blithely says, "It's all right, Rick. We'll be fine." She treats me like whatever I do is great. She tells me I am the ideal husband. This is absolutely not true. But she relates to me continually with grace. Her love and attitude toward me, especially when I mess up again, is not deserved by me. That's pure grace. And grace is the dominant force in the way God relates to us in Christ.

This force called grace is to be the dominant theme in the way we relate to each other in the church. Philip Yancey made the statement in his book *What's So*

Amazing About Grace? that grace is the one thing the church can give the world that it does not have. Grace is remarkably lacking in the world, and the church is to be the one place where the world encounters it.

Grace is life giving. And every single one of us longs for it desperately. In his book, *Sharpening The Focus Of The Church* (p. 231), Gene Getz made a statement that is all too true of the experience of many. "People who are tired of being 'cogs' in a secular machine find that in their church they become 'cogs' in a religious machine." I often hear people saying something like, "I believe in spirituality, but I don't believe in institutionalized religion." In part that's because they don't want to be a nameless part of an organization. Our world is so impersonal and our souls rebel against that.

We shop at supermarkets where we seemingly never have the same clerk twice, and that is fairly typical of all our dealings. Laurie and I have met a clerk named Ruben at one store where we shop for groceries. He's another follower of Jesus. In another store we've met Irene who works in the produce section. We've met Becky who occasionally waits on us at our favorite Italian restaurant. But for the most part we have no idea who the people are who sell us our groceries or our clothes, or who wait on us in restaurants, and they have no idea who we are. Our social security number is more important than our name, which means we are more a number than a person. It is not that big of a deal if some crook learns my name, but if he learns my social security number it could create a disaster for me. It is all so impersonal and we long to be a real person some place.

The church, most of all, should be different than that. This is a place where each member should be valued, not because they are winsome, beautiful, likeable, attractive, famous, rich, powerful, talented or productive, but because they are so valued by our God that he was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice to rescue them and have a relationship with them. It is because each one is treasured and delighted in by God himself. Here is where people should find the grace of being treasured just for who they are.

Grace means we will accept each other with all our imperfections. Years ago in another ministry one day I was in a staff meeting. We were asked in the meeting to each talk about one aspect of life in which we felt inadequate. I was asked to go first. I found that to be a difficult task. It wasn't hard because it was embarrassing or because I had a hard time coming up with one. Quite the contrary. I had a hard time because I couldn't come up with many aspects of life in which I didn't feel inadequate. What should I talk about? I told them I feel inadequate in almost

everything I do. So much of life for me is about just trying to survive as I feel like I am inadequate and failing. It is about hoping people won't notice how woefully far short I fall in so many ways or if they do will have the grace to accept me anyway and not make a big deal of it.

What surprised me was that one person after another then said, "I'm so glad you said that because that's exactly how I feel." All of us felt mostly inadequate and lived with the constant threat and fear that people were going to see just how terribly lacking we were. That experience left me with two possibilities. One was that we had an unusually inept and inadequate staff. The other is that what we felt was what most of us humans feel most of the time. I'm pretty sure that the second possibility is the right one.

That means that everyone around you in the church feels that inadequacy. We've had to face it in our relationship with God and accept that our adequacy comes from him. It is through his grace. The same force should impact our relationships with each other. This is to be the place where we can rest because here we don't have to prove that we are "adequate." We don't rely on our adequacy, what forms and rules our fellowship with each other is that life giving grace.

When Laurie and I were with our now southern kids they took us to the Wild Animal Safari in Georgia. This is a park where they have giraffes, antelope, zebras, buffalo, water buffalo, boar, and other animals roaming freely. You drive through the park in a beat up vehicle you rent at the park. Just inside the gate there are animals waiting. They want food, and they know the people have food to give them. They want something from you and they are not shy about it. Some of them are almost aggressive and they try to stick their faces inside the car to get at the food. They have no interest in us humans, they only want the food. It occurs to me that everywhere we go we encounter the same thing in human society. Everybody wants something from you. They aren't usually as shameless and overt as those animals. They are more crafty about it, but if you can't or won't give them whatever it is they want from you, they will lose interest in you in a hurry. Grace pervading in our church will mean that we don't primarily try to use people for our own ends, try to get something from them. We see our role in relating to them as primarily trying to give to them.

Our church is in its fourth year of existence. We've all gotten to know each other better than we ever had before, which means we've become more aware of how inadequate all of us are than we ever knew before. We know now that this person or that person that we thought was so wonderful has some really odd quirks. Sure

these are nice people, but they can also be irritating. What can save us from being disillusioned, from walking away in annoyance and disappointment? Only the grace of God flowing through us can save us.

PEOPLE ON A SPECIAL MISSION

In John 20:21 Jesus said to his followers, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me, I am sending you.” Jesus was sent by the Father to do his will, to accomplish the greatest feat in human history, the rescue of the human race by Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross. Jesus then told his followers, including us, that he is sending us the way the Father sent him. We have been sent by Jesus to do the will of the Father.

In Philippians 1:27 Paul told the Philippians, “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in the spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.” We are to live worthy of the gospel of Christ, to contend for the faith. This is our mission.

Jesus said to his followers, to us, in Matthew 5:14, “You are the light of the world.” A light has a mission. It is to bring light to the darkness. That is part of our mission. We have been given grace and that grace has brought us forgiveness, God’s unconditional love that every human being needs as badly as their lungs need air, hope, an ability to be secure and safe in who we are in Christ. The world is dark. It knows nothing of those things. We are to be the light shining in the darkness. In us individually and corporately, in the way we live and the way we relate to each other and to the world, the world is to see the light shining. Here, in us, they are to find hope, they are to see God’s love at work, they are to see grace in action.

Unfortunately we find it awfully easy to lose sight of our mission. A few weeks ago I was watching the Chargers play a game on TV. At a crucial point in the game an opposing player stopped one of the Chargers short of a badly needed first down by driving him out of bounds. He had made an important play. But then he made a more important one. Proud of his accomplishment he began yapping at the Charger. As he passed him going back on the field he slapped the ball out of his hands. It was a childish, ridiculous thing to do. It is also something the NFL does not allow, because things like that tend to instigate fights. A referee was standing right there he immediately tossed his penalty flag. It was an unsportsmanlike penalty of 15 yards giving the Chargers a first down. That player lost sight of the mission. He began to think he was about himself and proving he was better than

the other guy. Had he been focused on the mission of the team winning the game he would have avoided such a dumb action and his team would have won. We need to always remember that as Christ's body we are here to do his work. Our reason for existing as a church is nothing more than to do the will of the Father and to declare his praise by our words and lives.

Laurie and I took Carissa's rabbit, Lily Belle, back to her on our recent trip to Mississippi. We had to carry her on the airplane with us in a little animal carrier. This produced some interesting interactions with the TSA. They sent us through the "low risk" line as we went through security because they obviously judged us to be unlikely candidates as terrorists. But then they insisted on a special screening for Lily Belle. So we were low risk but she was high risk? It was absurd. Laurie had to take her into a special room and take her out of her carrying case. Then she had to hold her while they put her case through the scanner. After that they had Laurie put the rabbit back in the case then they scanned her hands looking for traces of explosives. Obviously they feared Lily Belle was a bunny bomb. The whole thing was annoying and ridiculous. But Laurie bore it with patience and good humor. She did so because she is on a mission. Her life isn't about convenience, it is about being light in the darkness, about conducting herself in a manner worthy of the gospel. This mission rules us in everything we do.

PEOPLE AWARE OF A SPECIAL PRESENCE

In Exodus 33:12-16 Moses prayed that God would go with Israel. God promised he would. Moses made the point that God's presence was the only thing that set the people of Israel apart. The same is true of us. What makes us different? What makes us noteworthy? Nothing that we do. What makes us significant is that God is present with us. God has promised to go with us. In Matthew 28:20 the last thing Jesus said is "I will be with you always, even to the end of the age." He is still with us. This is the most important thing about us. God is with us. God is present in everything we do wherever we go.

It is all too easy for a church to become a human organization that does exactly what humans can do. Whether God were in it or not it would operate exactly the same way, look the same, act the same and accomplish the same. If we are to be what God wants us to be we must expect God to be present with us. We must live as though he is real and active among us. This, of course, would mean that our first priority is prayer, because we believe it is powerful.

It also means we continually rejoice in God's presence with us. We look for his will. We expect him to work in our midst. We live in awe of him at all times,

whether they be good times or bad. We will believe he is at work no matter what happens. It means God is going to be not just the Lord of the church, but the Lord of this church. It means we will praise him as he deserves. It means we will let him set our agenda and we will look to him continually. It means we will trust him to do whatever he desires to do with us.

Yes, but what's the plan? That is where people tend to go. What are we supposed to do? What's the program? What's the vision? Laurie and I received a gift from her brother and sister in law. It required some assembly. That is usually very bad news for me. With trepidation I got out the assembly instruction, determined to read it carefully and take it step by step to put this thing together right. Let me read the instructions to you. "Step one. Put metal top "B" on base "A" as shown. Step two. It is ready to use." Now that's a plan I can follow. I need simple plans. So that's what I have for our church. The plan is to focus on these things that matter. Having awe of God, living with him as a real presence among us, pursuing his work and letting grace rule. We are going to follow our real and living God wherever he leads us.