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A STRANGE WAY TO PLAY THAT GAME

Psalm 9:1-2

Carissa and Michael are in their new house, which they love, but they have some changes they want to make. They started with paint. So Laurie and I have spent a number of hours at their house helping paint some of the rooms. From past experience I knew enough to wear clothes that I would not mind sacrificing to paint, but I am still amazed at what happens when I paint. I end up with a lot of paint on my body. I got so much paint on my hands the first day we painted that I decided to wear gloves the next time. I also decided to be extra careful to make sure to keep from getting paint on me. Despite my precautions somehow I managed to end up with paint on my hands even though I was wearing gloves. I have no idea how that happened. But it's worse than that. After painting I found paint on my nose, my knee, the inside of my elbow, the ends of my toes, and various other locations on my body. In many cases I have no idea how the paint could have gotten there.

In a way our living in this world reminds me of that. The Bible is quite clear in telling us that the world system is opposed to God and designed to draw us away from him. The problem for us is that we have to make our way through this world and it has a tendency to get on us more deviously and persistently than paint gets on a clumsy amateur painter like me. Even if we are careful about it somehow it gets on us. God has given us some great help with that. He gives us his grace and his presence. He gives us his word to help us. But he also gives us the church. Our brothers and sisters in Christ can have a great effect in helping us deal with the world and its polluting effects. Today I want you to think about not the church at large in the world, but our little branch of it. To direct us today I want to start by looking at the beginning of Psalm 9.

I'm not going to teach the entire Psalm, but just want to take a thought from the first two verses. David wrote, "I will give thanks to you Lord, with all my heart; I will tell of all your wonderful deeds. I will be glad and rejoice in you; I will sing the praises of your name, O Most High." The message was that God has done many wonderful things, both in general and specifically for David. The right response to God's kindness is to give thanks. We get so used to God's kindness and his grace to us that we neither notice it nor acknowledge it.

I noticed as I looked at these verses that not only did the Psalmist give thanks to God, he did so "with all my heart." This was no mere tip of the cap to the Almighty. This was whole hearted, passionate thanks. That is what we should be giving to God on a continual basis.

Laurie and I went for a walk on the beach at the end of the day recently. It was a glorious, warm day. I was flooded with realizations of how much I have to give thanks to God for. The ocean and the waves were beautiful, the sky was a glorious blue, the air felt just perfect, and I was walking with Laurie, who is spectacular. I realized the ocean, the waves, the sky, the beautiful day, my incredible wife are all gifts from God. My ability to see all the glory is a gift. The fact that I live here where I can visit the beach is a gift. As I reflected I thought of the fact that knowing God is an incredible gift. There are so many people who live in darkness and do not know his love, grace and glory. Being forgiven is a great gift. Having the hope of eternal life is a priceless gift. Being able to talk to God is huge, and it is also a gift from him.

When someone does something kind for you the right way to respond is to give thanks. We recently had to have some plumbing work done in our kitchen and a friend in the church made it happen for us purely out of his kindness. How rude, selfish and boorish it would be if we did not thank him. And it is rude, boorish and selfish of us if we do not thank God.

Thanking God has a profound effect. It puts us in right relationship to God. It reminds us and expresses the truth that we are totally dependent upon him. He does not need us, but we need him and his kindness more critically than we need air. Before him we have reason only to be humble, for everything we have is a gift from him that we do not deserve. So giving thanks puts us in a right frame of mind toward him. Romans 1 reminds us that failing to give thanks is the starting point of all the problems of the human race. Giving thanks also honors him. It creates a positive frame of mind for us, for it focuses us on the infinity of good we receive from God rather than the negatives in life.

As a pastor I spend a lot of time reminding all of us in our church of how we are to live. But I am failing seriously if I do not also spend time thanking God and reminding all of us of what great kindness he has shown us. On this anniversary of the beginning of our church I want to share a few things I am so very thankful to God for. I will end with some encouragement going forward, but I want us all to thank God for his wonderful deeds today.

GOD IS AT WORK IN US

In Psalm 126:1-3 says, “When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion, we were like those who dreamed. Our mouths were filled with laughter, and our tongues with songs of joy. Then it was said among the nations, ‘The Lord has done great things for them.’ The Lord has done great things for us, and we are filled with joy.”

That Psalm refers to the time when God’s people had been judged by God due to their persistent disobedience and ended up with their land being conquered and destroyed, and many of them in exile in a foreign land. Yet God had promised he would restore them to their homeland, and after 70 years he did. They were powerless. The idea of them going back to Canaan and rebuilding their nation was a pipe dream, and they knew it. There was no hope of them accomplishing it. But God made it happen. They were thrilled and full of joy because God had done something for them that was unique in history. Other people groups suffered the same fate the Jews did, and they simply faded from history. But God gave the Jewish people the gift of having their nation back and once again being a people.

It is clear in that Psalm that they were very much aware that this was a work of God. God did something for them that they could never have accomplished for themselves. I rejoice and thank God because he has done something a little like that for us as a church. We exist because God has worked to make this happen.

First we must remember that we all are alive to God spiritually because God has made us alive. We are here as followers of Jesus because God has worked to save us. Ephesians 2:4-5 says, “Because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions – it is by grace you have been saved.” Paul began that section of his letter in verse 1 by saying, “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.”

We are dog sitting Doc and Banjo, Toby and Anna's two dogs, because of the arrival of Cara, the newest Myatt. They are nice dogs, but they are kind of the reverse of each other. In the house Doc is insane and drives us to distraction with his hyper craziness, while Banjo is great. Outside Doc is terrific, but Banjo wants to bark at and chase everything, even things that aren't there. This week being with them made me miss Luke, our dog who was with us for 16 years. He was a great dog, and possibly the cutest ever to live. So I pleaded with Luke to come back and be our dog again. He didn't even acknowledge my plea, wherever he is. That's because he's dead.

Dead creatures, including humans, are utterly beyond hope. They can do nothing. They cannot act. They cannot even will to act. If you don't believe me try an experiment. Go to the cemetery and give your best motivational speech, fervently exhort all those people to quit lying around so uselessly. Urge them to get up and attempt something great. You will get no takers. They cannot change their condition even a little, because they cannot do anything. They cannot even hear your speech!

Paul says all of us, all human beings, are spiritually were dead. We could not do anything to change our condition. We were dead, spiritually capable of exactly zero. We were not even able to hear God calling to us because our spiritual senses are dead. That is a dim view of us humans. Perhaps, but it is also true. Just read Jesus' Sermon on the Mount some time and think about its message. Jesus said we should be so good that we never even get angry at people, we don't even think mean things about them or wish to strike back at them when they hurt us. Not only are we not to act on such compulsions, a truly good person, a truly spiritually alive person, doesn't even have thoughts like that. There's nothing there but goodness and kindness in every thought.

How far are we from that perfection? About as far as we are from the edge of the universe. Can we fix that? If we just try a little harder will we finally get there? No, we might get a little better, but the truth is on that meter our most disciplined, strenuous efforts don't even move the needle.

Evidence of this problem is everywhere in the human race. We've got a sad example of it going on in our neighborhood right now. There is an ugly war going on over our HOA board. A woman in the neighborhood decided that for no real reason the volunteers currently serving on the board were bad news and she has fomented a rebellion against them. The weird thing is there isn't really one big issue precipitating this. It's just people fighting over really not very much, and the fight has been ugly. There's been name calling, lies, false accusations, bitterness and broken relationships. And it's all over pretty much nothing. What is wrong with people? Why does this happen? Why does it happen everywhere in the world on a depressingly consistent basis? It is because we're spiritually dead.

Being spiritually dead means we cannot even hear God's appeal to us to get right with him and be spiritually live. We couldn't respond to it even if we could hear it, but dead people cannot even hear it. But God, through Jesus Christ, made us alive. God has the power to create life, and he has done that in us through his Spirit. The fact that you even hear him calling to you is evidence of the work of the Spirit.

We need to remember that each one of us who is a believer in Jesus is a miracle in the league of the resurrection. We didn't believe in Jesus because we were smarter, better, more religious, more spiritual, or simply luckier than other people. We believed in Jesus because God miraculously worked to make our dead spirits alive in Christ.

This group of people gathered together is a collection of astounding miracles that is vivid evidence of the working of the Holy Spirit. This is profound reason to continually give thanks to God. Were it not for the work of the Holy Spirit none of us would be here and we would not know the wonder and joy of being God's adopted children.

Not only are we individually works of the Holy Spirit, but we are together also a work of the Holy Spirit. The fact that the Spirit is present in each one of us means this is a powerful place. It may not look powerful in the eyes of the world, for our world sees only that which is big and impressive to human eyes.

Our culture is enamored with the big, the impressive, the powerful, and the splashy. That tends to carry over into the church. It is pretty much pervasive among us that if God is working somewhere the result will be just what our culture looks for--big, impressive, powerful and the splashier the better. Deeply desiring to have God work among us we invest our energy into creating ministries that fit that profile. Let's go for big, impressive, organizations that will make people sit up and take notice.

So much of what we hear about at conferences for pastors, read about in books is how to create such ministries. What will make the church grow? What will have big impact, which means cause people to sit up and take notice? Let's figure out what programs and strategies to use and what kind of dynamic leader we must have to make that happen.

There are two problems with this. First, in 1 Corinthians 3:6-7 as he was discussing his ministry and that of others, Paul wrote, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow. So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow." So who makes things grow? It is God, not humans, not methods, not programs.

Since we know that using the right methods and strategies we humans can produce impressive visible results, but that the growth that God aims at cannot be produced

by human activity and strategy, I submit that the growth he cares about is not the same as the visible, measurable numbers our culture is so enamored with. In other words, it is entirely possible to produce an impressive, large organization, that is purely human and may have little to do with what God is actually doing.

Second, we should always remember that God told Elijah he is not in the visible, powerful and impressive, but in the gentle whisper. What God is doing often is quiet and humble. Throughout history the kingdom of God has been carried forward by small cadres of believers in Jesus faithfully following him. God's plan to save us all was not impressive and big, it involved a baby born in a manger. Where we would expect big, splashy, impressive, God worked in the most unexpected humble and quiet way imaginable.

Years ago I had a conversation with a brother in Christ who asked me about my plans and dreams for the church. I told him my plan and dream is that we would follow Jesus, that we would love each other, that we would live in awe of God, that we would bring the grace of God and the presence of his kingdom to the world. He insisted that we needed a vision, a plan, a dream that was big and would inspire and challenge people. I said, "We have the biggest dream possible. It is to be a group of people that give the world a taste of the kingdom of God. It is to live in God's grace. What is more inspiring than that?"

We forget that a church is fundamentally a work of the Spirit of God. It is another miracle. We don't have a charismatic leader, we don't have a marketing plan and lots of cool programs. But what we have is the Holy Spirit at work among us, drawing us all to Jesus. This brings great freedom for which I am very thankful. We are not worried about being like some other group or competing with someone else or trying to "look successful." We have the freedom just to be who we are and to rejoice in the work of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

God has worked to actually make this church exist and continue. When we first proposed the idea of starting a church God unexpectedly provided a place for us to meet. On several separate occasions we have had needs for someone to take leadership in children's ministry, youth ministry, the worship team. Time and time again just when the need became apparent God provided a person to step in and take on the responsibility. It hasn't happened because we had a great plan. It has just been God providing what we need. And we have seen the same thing happen in regard to finances all the way along.

This is a powerful place because Jesus is real here. By that I mean that your faith is real and central to all of you. I give thanks to God because you are not posturing or playing at religion. You are a part of this church because Jesus is real to you. You want to know him in a deeper way, you want to become more like him and you want to serve him more fully. I see in you a desire to have Jesus truly be Lord of your lives. You are serious about knowing and loving him.

This church really has been the body of Christ. It has been and continues to be a real community, a family of followers of Jesus. Recently I had an extended conversation with another follower of Jesus who is not a part of this church. He and his family are going through a terrible and devastating health crisis. It has been going on for a year and likely will continue for several more. My friend wasn't bitter, but he said that they have gotten exactly nothing from their support system, especially from their church. He said it has surprised him and has caused him to question what the church is supposed to be. I wish that was the only time I have heard that, but I know some other people who recently have gone through some hard times due to some health issues and have had the exact same experience.

I have been touched and encouraged at how this church has truly been a community. Again, we are not perfect, but time after time I hear from you how as you are dealing with various difficulties brothers and sisters in Christ from our little church have stepped in to help. I thank God for how you care about each other.

I thank God that I have seen you extend grace to each other. A member of the church once said to me with a smile, "it seems like we got all the people with problems in our church." John Ortberg wrote a book with a great title called *Everybody's Normal 'Til You Get To Know Them*. I think every church gets all the people with problems, because those are the only people that exist. What I have seen is that you all have accepted and loved each other with all your quirks and eccentricities. You have accepted and loved me with all my quirks and eccentricities, of which there are an abundance. I have been in a situation where that love and acceptance were absent, and I can attest to the fact that it is both painful and exhausting. The grace you all give to me and to each other is refreshing and life giving.

In some ways our church softball games are a picture of the way the church should be. A few weeks ago since the softball field was unavailable we had a cornhole competition. It was quite a hotly contested event. I don't want to be critical, but I am disappointed that there hasn't been more publicity about the team that was

undefeated and won the championship. Just saying...Our softball games actually are a contrast with a competition that has winners and losers. Everyone is invited and not only welcome but encouraged to play in those games. All ages and all levels of athletic ability participate. We've had people 6 years old play and some over the age of 70 as well. We have some superb athletes and some...uh...people who might have a little trouble walking and chewing gum at the same time. Not only do they all participate, but all are celebrated. Everyone celebrates and makes a big deal out of it when one of the young guys like Dylan or Christopher Turner bombs a prodigious home run. But everyone rejoices and equally celebrates when a young kid or a person who has never played baseball actually swings the bat and hits the ball. Everyone waits patiently and roots for the person who feels awkward and repeatedly swings and misses, and when that person actually does make contact all cheer and the opposing players make sure that somehow that person is not thrown out at first base. Good plays are heartily cheered by both teams, regardless of who makes the play. My wife is actually very coordinated. She took to surfing quickly when she took a lesson, more quickly than her husband. She has better ground strokes when playing tennis than her husband. However, she can't catch. Earlier this year in a game she was playing outfield when a fly ball came in her direction. She typically treats fly balls like they're radioactive. Stay as far from that things as possible. Her primary goal is to not get hurt. But in this instance for some inexplicable reason, she chose to throw caution to the wind, take the risk, put her life in danger and go try to catch that fly ball. She somehow she stuck her glove up, closed her eyes and caught the ball. And everyone on both teams cheered for her. That's the norm. When ever anyone makes a good play all cheer the person, regardless of which team they are on. To some people the way we play the game makes no sense. We don't keep track of outs in an inning. We just let everyone hit. No one is shamed or punished for mistakes or bad plays, everyone just laughs. No one boasts about good plays. No one keeps score, there is no winner and no loser, everyone just laughs and rejoices in being together. Some might say "That's a strange way to play the game. The way you play with no one keeping score, what do you prove?" We prove we love and enjoy each other.

Isn't that how the church is supposed to work? All are welcomed and encouraged to participate. All are celebrated. No one boasts about their abilities, no one is ridiculed, rejected or condemned for failures. No one is keeping score, there are not winners or losers, just people loving and encouraging each other.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

We must individually live in a vital, dynamic relationship with Jesus.

Imagine that a group of people gathers together with the dream of collectively creating a community that has a culture of being physically fit. They love the idea of being part of a group that encourages exercise and healthy lifestyles. Then suppose that no one in the group actually exercises and they are all badly out of shape with no intention of changing that situation. How is the culture of physical fitness? It is a joke.

If we are to be a community that has the culture of Christ, a place where living with Jesus and being like him is lifted up as the prime goal and seriously encouraged, then we must individually live with that as our reality. The life of Christ existing in each of us will join together to create a community in which the life of Jesus is very real, present and observable.

It's not that hard. Jesus said he will never leave us. If you have put your faith in Jesus his Spirit is in you. He is there every moment of every day and night. So the plan is easy. Thank him continually for grace, for loving you, and in every situation. Give your life to him. Tell him continually that you want him to be Lord of your life, of every moment of your life, then let him be Lord. When hard times or temptations come along, tell Jesus you want him to be Lord of your life. What you want more than anything is to do his will and glorify him. Then trust him in everything. Believe that what he supplies is enough.

We must live in awe of God.

I desire for this church that we will continually have an awe of our glorious God, that we will be overwhelmed by his goodness, his majesty, his love, and his power. Sometimes it is easy for a sort of unreality to creep into our faith. We talk casually about God and there's an almost ho hum kind of spirit about the whole thing. What would happen if on the way home today you came across where a high power electric transmission line had come down on the road. How do you think people would regard that wire? Would they casually remark on it and say, "Maybe we ought to think about being careful of it"? No way, they'd keep far from it. They'd be aware of the power of that thing and would treat it with enormous respect. So it ought to be with our God. We claim to know and worship the Almighty God, who is the Creator of all that exists. This universe we live in that is beyond our ability to grasp was something he created with a word. God is powerful beyond our comprehension, wise beyond our knowledge, merciful and full of grace to a degree that appears almost insane to us. He is patient with us. He is at work at every moment in our world and present in everything that is going on around us. We

should look for him everywhere in everything and we should live lives full of praise of his glory. It is living in awe of him that will give us hope and strength in the hard times and humility in the times of triumph. It is having an awe of him that will make him real among us and will give us hope.

The first 2 years after Toby graduated from college he worked as an assistant football coach at the high school level. His second year he was the offensive coordinator at a school that had never had any success in football. They had a small, not especially talented team. But they had some very good coaches. They started the season by getting crushed in the first 2 games but then began getting better. They went on a roll, won a bunch of games, won their league and went to CIF playoffs. They won their first 2 playoff games, but then came up against a team that was way better than them. It was a mismatch. The other team was bigger, faster, stronger and had been destroying their opponents. The kids on the team knew they were likely to get ruined. But suppose before the game the coaches said to the team, "We have someone special that is going to come talk to you about this next game, and we've been given permission to have him play for us. He's going to talk to you now, so give all your attention to him. His name is Tom Brady." What effect do you think that would have? Would they listen to him? Are you kidding? They'd be in awe. They'd listen like they never had in their lives. And they'd be excited. Tom Brady's going to play for us? Then we have a chance to win!

Our God is infinitely more impressive and powerful than Tom Brady. He's on our team. Or I guess I should say we're on his. As we are aware of his majesty, power, glory, goodness, love and grace we will be humbled, but we will be anxious to hear what he has to say, and we will be confident about forging through life because he is with us. We will long desperately for our lives to reflect his glory and for us to bring honor on his name. The thing that will matter most to us in our priorities, our values, in every relationship, every interaction, every act we take and every word we speak will be to bring honor to him.

I love the song Glorious by Paul Baloche. Every time we sing it I find myself in awe of God. The words are "Look beyond the tombstone, see the living God. See the resurrected Ruler of my heart. No one else above him, none to match his worth. The hope of his returning fills the universe. Glorious, mine eyes have seen the glory of the Lord. Glorious, he stands above the rulers of the earth." As we live in that reality, in awe at the glory of the Lord, we will have hope and courage to live for his kingdom.

We must live in grace.

I have mentioned before that I have an eating disorder. That disorder is I seem to have difficulty actually getting food into my mouth. Laurie is usually dismayed when we have burgers and fries because I love ketchup, and she knows with 100% certainty that I will end up with ketchup on my clothes somewhere. But it's not just ketchup. I'm an equal opportunity spiller. I can do mustard, salad dressing, pasta sauce, anything that stains. No matter how careful I try to be it is the rare meal where I don't end up with some kind of food stain on me.

The sad thing is there seems to be a genetic component to this disorder, for my daughter also has it. She's not nearly as bad as her father, but she seems to have the same difficulty. When Carissa and I both eat a meal with a group of people afterward I can identify where we sat. Just look for the two places with the biggest mess, and that's where we were. So recently Carissa and I were eating with Laurie and for some reason Laurie had a rough time. She spilled on herself a couple of times. My first thought was, "Uh oh, is it possible this is contagious? Has Laurie finally caught it?" Do you know what she got from Carissa and me? There was no disgust at her messiness, no ridicule of her. There was only empathy. "We feel your pain."

We are all in the same boat here in the body of Christ. We are all flawed, struggling human beings who have admitted that God's divine grace is our only hope. So in this place what others should experience when they fail or mess up is "we feel your pain." Ephesians 4:32 says, "Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you."

We Must Serve.

Our attitude must be that we have been committed to serve. We are here to serve one another in love. That serving may include helping the church function, whether that be by teaching kids in Sunday school, putting out signs, greeting people on Sunday, running the power point or helping with an event. There are endless ways we can serve each other. And we can serve by caring for each other, bringing meals to others when needed, giving someone a call when they are discouraged, visiting someone who is sick, the list is endless.

We must share.

It has been said that the church is the only organization that exists for the benefit of its non-members. That's not exactly accurate, for it's not an organization, and it does exist in part to help its members. But the point is we are called by God to bless the world. That has always been part of God's plan for his people going all

the way back to Abraham. So God wants us to share his grace, his love, the aroma of Christ, and the message of life in Christ with the world around us.

We must pray.

If we are in awe of God and we believe that what he supplies is enough, surely our highest priority will be prayer.