



Connections

◆ A Journal by & for Women in Ministry ◆

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Invisible Love

By Sheila Graham

I hate to turn on the TV news or look at the headlines on my phone or in my newspapers. And some days I avoid the news altogether. Hatred seems to be the theme in so many cases, and I need a break from all that negativism. Do you feel that way too?

I pray about it; I think that's what God wants me to do, but what else can I do as one person in a whirlwind world of hate?

I'm frustrated.



Then one day a friend shared this on Facebook: "While much of America seems to be getting more and more divisive, I'm going to be holding doors for strangers, letting people cut in front of me in traffic, greeting all I meet, exercising patience with others, and smiling at strangers. I'll do this as often as I have the opportunity. I will not stand idly by and let children live in a world where unconditional love is invisible and being rude is acceptable. Join me in showing love and respect to others. Find your way to swing the pendulum in the direction of love. Because today, sadly, hate is gaining ground. Love must begin somewhere and love will overcome hate. Imagine the difference if we each purposefully love a little more."

What really got to me was the part about children growing up living "in a world where unconditional love is invisible." How awful to contemplate! Those little ones down the road from me getting off and on the school bus, those cuties scampering off to their Sunday school class at church, my own grandbabies, living in a world divided by hate and where rudeness is justified and accepted. What is our responsibility? What can we do? Is it this simple? No, it's not simple. It's especially not easy to always be patient with others. I don't like it when people are rude to me or cut me off in traffic (same thing). I try to remember to smile and be cheerful with grocery clerks or waiters while at the same time checking my receipt to be sure they didn't goof up in charging me (again).

And that's another reason I hate to read or hear the news. I respond to some of those horrible headlines with hatefulness in my heart, not love. Love is not my first reaction, especially where abuse to children is involved. I ask how in the world can people neglect and abuse children, sometimes their own children?

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Invisible Love

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But Jesus says we're to love our enemies and to do good to those who cause us injury, just the opposite of what I feel, and right along the lines of the man or woman who wrote the words above. Jesus said he didn't come to this world to condemn it.

When I judge those people in the headlines, I am wrong. I become part of the wave of hatred, not a positive force against it. I do not know the circumstances behind their actions or even if some of these people are really guilty of anything. And any involvement in the death of a precious child can create a living hell for the person or persons involved. Prayer and concern for others should be foremost in my mind.

Purposeful love takes forethought; it takes prayer; it takes furthering your relationship with God. It's not something that comes naturally, at least not in my case.

Holy Spirit, please, make me the loving, joyful Christian who is salt and light in this oftentimes dark world. Let my love be real and visible and let it lift the spirits of all those I come in contact with today. Amen.



Sheila asks you to join her and do something good for someone today, even someone who doesn't deserve it. Let your love be visible (Ephesians 4:29-32, NIV). You can email Sheila at grahams@ntin.net.

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Connections

Mission Statement

Primary: The Connections for Clergy Support Department provides intellectual, emotional, physical and spiritual support and encouragement in the personal lives of GCI ministry families.

Three primary means of serving are the *Connections* journal, the Connections for a Successful Ministry and Life web pages, and the Nurturennet forum. We highlight women in ministry but are inclusive of the needs of the entire family.

Secondary: To promote respect, understanding and support for women, their personal ministries and ministries that serve them.

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• CALIFORNIA •
TAM 2 U

Prince of Peace

As a school girl, I memorized some historical speeches given by famous Americans. I can remember only snippets now, but one line from Patrick Henry's speech to the Virginia House of Burgesses has always stayed with me: "Gentlemen may cry Peace, Peace—but there is no peace." It comes to mind while watching news stories about skirmishes and wars and when I hear people hoping for peace in war torn countries or even in their own neighborhoods (Jeremiah 6:14).

We want peace but in all of human history, it seems the one thing most elusive to us. We can't find it in our nations, homes or hearts. Peace may come for a short time, but one thing we can always count on is that it won't last.

Even though it eludes us as a butterfly flitting from flower to flower, we still hope for it, especially at this time of year. At Christ-

mas, we sing about peace, decorate with peaceful winter scenes and dream of peaceful family reunions. Most important, we look forward to a time when Jesus will return and bring us real and true peace. Isaiah 9:6 gives us a reason to hope for this: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (*NIV*).

In Colossians 3 Paul reminds us to let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts, for as one body, we are called to live in peace (v. 15). Because peace comes from Christ, we're not going to find it anywhere else but in him.

Perhaps this is why it's so hard to find and keep. People look for it inside themselves, in their governments, in rules and laws designed to keep peace, even in greeting card sentiments, but they don't look in the right place, the heart of Christ. He is the only one who has it and can give it. He *is* peace.

As we celebrate the birth of Jesus and why he came to earth, let's spend some time thinking about his greatest gifts, three of which are faith, hope and love, but undoubtedly a fourth is peace. When we live with an understanding of who God is and that all are included in his love, mercy and grace, we learn to trust him. As our trust in him grows, we begin to live as his beloved children and his peace rules our lives more and more (Colossians 3:15). Just as the love he puts in our hearts spills out to others, so will his peace.

Let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts this Christmas and every day of the year, as a taste and precursor to the day his peace will rule the nations.



For to us a child is born,
to us a son is given,
and the government will be
on his shoulders. And he
will be called Wonderful
Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting
Father, Prince of Peace.

Isaiah 9:6, *NIV*

Tammy



Waiting in Faith

By Carmen Fleming

The bougainvillea plant was violently removed from a large pot and replanted near the trellis covering the new patio. It was in shock. One of its thick roots snapped when the construction worker gave it a mighty tug. As the leaves yellowed and fell, I wondered if it would survive so radical a disruption.

I had hopes its branches would one day become heavy with bright red and green leaves and cover the new trellis. I looked for tiny green buds along its branches, the usual signs of life, but they were slow in coming. I dug around the trunk and gave it discarded coffee grounds. I watered it regularly and waited.

Laugh out loud, I was even desperate enough to talk to it. Perhaps it was putting all its energy into new roots, so I waited. I held on to the hope that hidden deep within her there was life. Still I waited.

There are many liminal spaces caused by disruptions of all kinds in our lives, divorce, a new career, a new baby, broken relationships or sickness. Just as we cannot see the repairs and restoration happening inside a transplanted vine, we cannot always see what God is doing as we wait for what is next. Our limited perspective requires we wait in uncertainty when nothing seems to be happening.

“I do believe, help me overcome my unbelief” is a step toward a God who allows only what he can redeem (Mark 9:24). From creation he promised to redeem all things. In

transitional times when uncertainty and doubt escalate we can come to the one who reigns as redeemer, Savior and Lord (Psalm 29:10-11).

As we wait, God may not immediately change the situation, but he provides everything we need physically, spiritually and emotionally. As we wait, our weak faith is undergirded by Jesus’ strong faith and ultimately we are transformed and brought into a deeper relationship with God.

Practice: Clench your hands into fists and confess to God what you are waiting for that would give you peace and fulfill your dreams. Now relax your hands and turn your palms facing upward.

Pray along these lines: I surrender _____ to you. I cast all my fear and anxiety and insecurity upon you, trusting you will do your part, trusting you will show me what my part is (if any). Please give me the wisdom to know your will for me, the willingness to accept it and the courage and strength to wait patiently. I need your help in each of these ways, for I cannot do any of them on my own. Give me what I need for today, physically, spiritually and emotionally. No more. No less. (Adapted from the “Daily Prayer of Surrender,” author unknown.)

Today, my bougainvillea is beautiful, vibrant, strong and productive. When I remember how dead this vine seemed, I’m encouraged to have hope and wait in my own places of uncertainty and ambiguity. As we wait on God and put our trust in him, he will give us the same beauty, vibrancy, strength and productivity.



“One of the most exciting things for Charles and me is our first grandchild, due in January 2017. It’s a girl! Charles is exercising his grandfather muscles: smiling a lot and getting massages for his cheek muscles. I have my arms open and a rocking chair ready.” You may email Carmen at carmen.fleming@gci.org.

Happiness is neither within us only,
or without us; it is the union
of ourselves with God.

—Blaise Pascal

Keep Your Line in the Water

Thoughts on Retirement

By James Roberts

I grew up in Missouri with clear streams and lovely lakes. I fished in the James River, Cowskin (yeah, cowskin) and Beaver creeks in Douglas and Green counties. But when I moved to California, I learned an entirely new dimension in fishing. It was called “deep sea.”

Several dozens of people would get on a vessel early in the morning and go out offshore for the day. Or sometimes we would go out in the evening and sleep while they drove the boat out on the back side of the Channel Islands. Some trips we would go offshore 55 miles to the back side of San Miguel Island.

There’s no way I can share all the experiences I’ve had on these trips. Breaching whales and hundreds of dolphins would come to the boat and jump up around it, so close you could reach out and touch them.

Where I am going with this is my observation of the various approaches to the trips the so-called fishermen took. Some were more interested in just sitting around in the galley drinking beer and playing cards. They weren’t really out there to fish, but to party.

Maturity in Christ is about consistent pursuit in spite of the attacks and setbacks. Maturity in Christ is not about finally attaining some level of pseudo-perfection. It is about remaining in the arms of God. Abiding and staying, even in my weakness, even in my failure.

—Angela Thomas

Not so with this cowboy. I was interested in catching enough fish to justify the cost of the trip. I would actually exchange fish for a portion of our food budget. So I learned to keep my line in the water. You are not going to catch fish if your pole is resting against the cabin.

I also learned something about bait. Everyone was wrestling with live anchovies that were hard to keep on the hook, and then they would just die. I figured out that what sea fish mostly eat is squid. So before a trip I would go to the supermarket and buy cut squid. I put the stinky stuff in my bait pack on my belt and while others were messing with the live bait and making all those trips to the tank, I just reached in my plastic bait pack and pulled out another strip of squid. And I pulled up fish after fish. I even won a trophy on one trip for the biggest fish caught.

So what’s the point? (I can hear you asking.) OK, as Christians we can’t just sit around. We need to keep our lines in the water. Even when we retire we need to stay active in the service of God’s people. We need to keep searching out the “squids” (the right bait) and keep catching fish. That’s exactly what Jesus told us to do.

Are you retired? Fine, but don’t think that means you get to stop catching fish.



Jim is a nearly 50-year employee of WCG/GCI. He graduated from Ambassador University in 1970 and married fellow grad Hazel Morgan. Jim (aka JR) worked for the church’s data processing/information center for 25 years before his transfer into field ministry. He served in Ohio for 18 months in 6 different congregations before moving to the Bay Area of northern California. JR now serves in our New Hope Congregation in Eagle Rock as a retired pastor and writer/editor. You may email him at jim.roberts@gci.org.

Zorro and Me

Celebrate Life

By Barbara Dahlgren

We in pastoral ministry know what it's like to be with people during the best of times and during the worst of times. Zorro and I have been there for weddings, graduations, anniversaries, childbirth and birthdays. We've also been there during natural disasters, job loss, accidents, sickness and death.

We've been to a lot of funerals. Psalm 116:15 says, "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of his saints." It may be precious to God, but those left behind deal with an aftermath of grief. Still, I admire those who bury their loved ones wanting to celebrate their lives instead of prolonging the mourning of death. There is nothing quite like a death to remind us that life is a gift, one to be celebrated daily.

A few years ago our friend Yuliya died after a long battle with cancer. I still remember excerpts from her journal, read at her memorial service. Here are some of Yuliya's thoughts on her illness:

"My soul, spirit and mind are all shouting—I want to live! I want to survive! I want to beat the disease! It's not fair. I am not supposed to die so young... I will not give up or give in to the disease or what the mean stupid cruel American doctors say. They cannot decide for me whether I will live or die... Nobody else can decide for us, except for God. I am constantly asking God to help me, heal me, save my life and help me do many good things in life for people."

"It is amazing to think how on a daily basis, I took so many things for granted when I was well... I could eat a meal without throwing up; I could go for a walk to enjoy the sunshine and the fresh air. I could go see my friends, go dancing or to a movie. There were so many things we can do to enjoy our

life, but I have no life anymore. Every day is a struggle for me to just feel okay."

"It breaks my heart to think that my life could end so early and all my dreams and talents will die with me ... One thought makes me happy that I will see God, my mom and dad. I will be a Guardian Angel for all my friends who helped me."

Journals can be wonderful tools to help us cope. The Psalms of David are filled with David talking himself through situations and concluding with peace in God. Yuliya's journal is like that. But one thing we can't miss is that life is a precious gift from God. All those everyday tasks we take for granted are reasons to celebrate the life God gives us.

God doesn't want us to fear death because what he has in store for us is so much better than what we have now. On the other hand, God wants us to celebrate and enjoy life! 1 Timothy 6:17 tells us God richly provides for our enjoyment.

I remember a column humorist Erma Bombeck wrote many years ago titled "If I Had My Life to Live Over Again." She said if she could live her life over again she would do things such as invite friends over even though the carpet was stained and the sofa was faded, eaten popcorn in the "good" living room, listen to her grandfather ramble about his youth, eat less cottage cheese and more ice cream, burn the pink sculptured candle, and so on.

She ended with: "There would have been more *I love you's* ... more *I'm sorry's* ... more *I'm listening's* ... but mostly, given another shot at life, I would seize every minute of it ... look at it and really see it ... try it on ... live it ... exhaust it ... and never give that minute back until there was nothing left of it."

I think life is meant to be enjoyed, not just endured. God is a God of joy. The Scriptures are full of exhortations to rejoice (Psalm 118:24; Philippians 4:4). God also likes to

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Celebrate Life

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celebrate. He likes a little singing (Ephesians 5:19, James 5:13), a little dancing (Psalm 149:3; Ecclesiastes 3:4), a little shouting (Isaiah 12:6; Psalm 47:1) and a lot of laughter (Proverbs 17:22; Psalm 126:2).

I'm not big on New Year's resolutions because of my inability to keep them. However, next year I'm hoping to enjoy and celebrate life just a little bit more.



"Zorro and I are looking forward to Christmas because the family will all be together. Merry, merry to everyone!" If you get a chance, check out Barbara's weekly blog called Barbara's Banter at www.barbdahlgren.com. You can email Barbara at bydahlgren@pacbell.net. She loves hearing from you!

Faith does not grow by being pulled up by the roots time and again to see how it is getting on. Faith grows when we look steadily toward God for the supply of all our needs and concentrate on Him. There is little point in becoming engrossed with our faith as if that were the thing we believed in.

—J.C.P. Cockerton

Lessons I Learned From Samson

By Tania McKinney

I find the story of Samson so encouraging. I've learned a few lessons from his life about myself and about God's nature. Samson was God's workmanship although he was disobedient and imperfect. He was constantly breaking the laws God gave Moses for Israel. He married the enemy, ate and socialized with pagans and from what I can tell, he had a big problem with fornication.

In Judges 14, Samson demands that his parents get a Philistine woman for his wife. Although this went against the law, God used this as an occasion to confront the Philistines.

Just like Samson, we are God's workmanship and he has works that were prepared in advance for us to do. Our mistakes do not hinder God from accomplishing these works. This is so encouraging to me. I don't want to make mistakes but when I do, God has it covered; it will not hinder me from accomplishing the works God has prepared for me.

This knowledge changed the way I saw my children. I do not need to micromanage their lives to save them from mistakes. This does not absolve me from responsibility; I still have to use wisdom in guiding my children because some mistakes have far-reaching, irreversible consequences, so we definitely want to steer them in a better direction.

It also means as a pastor's wife, I don't have to meddle in people's lives. I can allow them to make mistakes and know God will work it all out. It is really amazing to see how he works. For example, I don't have to interfere with that young mother with the

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Lessons from Samson

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precocious, bratty, little kid. I can just love her and the child, and later love the rebellious teen. So often I have seen that rebellious teen grow up to be a leader in the youth group. And sometimes, they even become pillars in the church, people you depend on heavily to get things done. However, even when it goes the other way and they leave the church, often when they are older they will come back. I have lived long enough to see that happen over and over.

It behooves us as parents and pastors to keep talking, as it says in Deuteronomy 6:6-9, when you walk in the way, sit at home, lie down and get up. We must put God's word and thoughts into our children and church members so if they stray there is something to come back to.

Another lesson is God will not put on us more than we can bear. God knew Samson's passions would not allow him to be an army general and lead Israel to war to defeat the Philistines. So he gave him a lesser job: to begin the deliverance of Israel. God gave him what he could be successful at. Does this mean his reward would be less than those who had bigger jobs? The answer is no. God grades us on how well we do with what he has given us.

This means I don't have to envy people with bigger titles, better jobs, better homes,

more money, bigger churches—the list could go on and on. I can be content with what God has given me.

Samson's law-breaking and disobedience caused him an early death. He paid a heavy price in this life. However, in the next life we see that Samson is mentioned with the likes of Gideon, Barak, Jephthah, David and Samuel, who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice and gained what was promised. His name is listed with those who shut the mouths of lions, quenched the fury of the flames and escaped the edge of the sword; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign enemies (Hebrews 11:32-34.)

From the life of Samson I learned our God has plans for all of us, is patient with us, does not meddle in our lives, does not micro manage us. He turns our weaknesses into strengths, assures us of success, praises us, is aware of everything we do even before we do it, makes it impossible for us to fail, and so much more.

Our God has it covered; we do not need to stress or fear. Whenever you feel like you are going nowhere, accomplishing nothing, just taking up space and everyone around you seems to be accomplishing so much, just remember the lessons of Samson. You are doing what God wants you to do and he is well pleased. Our God is a good God, a faithful God and a loving God, so we must always give him thanks.

God can do anything, you know—far more than you could ever imagine or guess or request in your wildest dreams! He does it not by pushing us around but by working within us, His Spirit deeply and gently within us.
Glory to God—Oh, yes!

—Ephesians 3: 20, 21
The Message Bible



"I am Nathania McKinney but I go by Tania. I was born and raised in the Bahamas and have served 21 years as a pastor's wife. I have three children, Robert Jr., Gabrielle and Ann-Marie, one daughter-in-law, Alicia, and one grandson, Robert, 11. We all reside in the Bahamas." You may email Tania at wcg@batelnet.bs.



Briefly Speaking...

Nurturenet

Nurturenet is our computer forum for women in ministry. Its purpose is to help you stay connected through digest-mode communication (each day's messages compiled into one email). You may use it for requests for information, prayer requests, to share ideas and resources, to receive updates on *Connections* news or just to stay connected!

To join or update your email address, please send Tammy a message at tammy.tkach@gci.org. Please do not reply to a post unless you want to address the entire list.



Please let us know if your email changes!

The Kingdom is a “he,” not an “it,” and in Jesus Christ both future expectation and present fulfillment are realized.

—Karl Barth, *The Christian Life: Church Dogmatics, Volume IV, Part 4: Lecture Fragments.*



Heroes of Faith

After reading the faith chapter in Hebrews for the hundredth, maybe more, times, I saw something I hadn't thought about before. (I'll bet that happens to you too.)

“By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain's. Through this he received approval as righteous, God himself giving approval to his gifts; he died, but through his faith he still speaks” (Hebrews 11:4, *NRSV*).

How would you like that said about you? Even after you're dead and gone, through your faith you still speak. I know I would.

OK, righteous Abel has been speaking from the Bible for millennia but what about us. Our names aren't recorded in Genesis or the faith chapter. How can we speak through our faith after we're gone?

After thinking about that, I realized we have our own heroes of faith. They might be our parents or some of our close friends. We know personally that they lived in the faith and died in the faith. They are our own personal heroes of faith.

And when all is said and done, it's really God's faith we're talking about here, isn't it, not our little faulty weak faith. It's his faith we depend on to live our lives day by day. Whatever our circumstances, how we live our lives speaks of our faith. And we can be sure, even in death that same faith, which comes from God, will continue to speak of our confidence and trust in him.



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Being a Light...has a lighter side!

I spent 20 minutes explaining life insurance options to one of our employees. After reviewing the different plans and monthly deductions, he decided to max out, choosing \$100,000 worth of life insurance. But he had one last question.

“Now,” he said, “what do I have to do to collect?”

My sister didn't do as well on her driver's education test as she'd hoped. It might have had something to do with how she completed this sentence: “When the ___ is dead, the car won't start.”

She wrote: “Driver.”

It's so simple to be wise. Just think of something stupid to say and then don't say it.

—Sam Levenson

My 14-year-old daughter, Maggie, and her best friend, Joannie are fans of 60's music, so they got front-row tickets to attend a Peter Paul and Mary concert in our town.

When they returned home from the concert that night, I wanted to hear all the details. My daughter said, “Mom, during the show, we looked back and saw hundreds of little lights swaying to the music. At first we thought people were holding up cigarette lighters. Then we realized the lights were the reflections off all the eyeglasses in the audience!”

A man is on trial for armed robbery. The jury comes back with the verdict. The foreman stands, clears his throat and announces, “Not guilty.”

The defendant leaps to his feet. “Thank God!” he shouts. “Does that mean I get to keep the money?”

Bill's wife started noticing how forgetful he was becoming. Being the concerned wife, she convinced him to see a doctor.

Bill was a little worried when the doctor came in. Sensing his patient's nervousness, the first thing the doctor did was to ask what was troubling him.

“Well,” Bill answered. “I seem to be getting forgetful. I'm never sure I can remember where I put the car, or whether I answered a letter, or where I'm going, or what it is I'm going to do once I get there, if I get there. So, I really need your help. What can I do?” The doctor thought for a moment then answered, “Pay me in advance.”

—clean laffs



—churchart.com