

JOURNEY OF GRACE

THE STORY OF GRACE CHURCH

In The small, rural town of Dover, just outside of Boston, Massachusetts stands a quaint country church. From the outside it may appear like so many others, yet it is no “ordinary” church. It is not part of any denominational or institutional organization. It is not under the auspices of some hierarchical configuration. It is a special place, a place of hope and faith that has cut through denominational differences and divisions to celebrate the essence of the Christian faith. Grace Church. The church is a simple space, where one can find a profoundly meaningful experience of a relationship with God through grace.

The church is pastored by a husband and wife team who actually built the church themselves. But the story of Grace Church began long before any concrete was poured or any timbers were felled. It began in the hearts and minds of two people who have their own testimonies of what it is to experience *grace*.

THE JOURNEY

Peter DiSanto was born the third of five sons to Virginia and Paul DiSanto. Paul was a self employed furniture upholsterer, a family man, a man of many friends and great faith. A storybook childhood would come to a devastating end when at 40 years old, Paul passed away. Peter’s world was suddenly thrown into turmoil. His own young faith was shaken, and anguish and grief festered into emptiness and despair. Seemingly overnight, Peter’s faith was shattered as he felt God had cruelly let him down.

The turbulent and tumultuous climate of the 60s and early 70s set the stage for the soul searching that Peter would undergo. While delving into the psychedelic counterculture of the day, it wasn’t long before Peter saw the illusion of the peace movement give way to reveal hypocrisy, greed and materialism. Sadly, there were no real answers, only more pain and confusion.

Finding no real solace, no salve for the yearnings within, Peter felt desperate and disillusioned. It was at this point that he turned to Eastern thought and meditation for answers, as did many in this era of introspection. After six months of meditation and “transcending” to altered states of consciousness, emptiness again filled his heart. Peter was compelled to continue his journey to find the answers that gnawed inside his heart. Two days after his high school graduation, Peter, like a prodigal, took his inheritance (\$325!), hopped in his ‘63 Impala and hit the road. Destination: unknown.

Looking for nothing in particular (only the answers to life), Peter found some peace and a home in the Green Mountains of Vermont. Living in an abandoned hunting cabin on the side of Scragg Mountain, he took work from a nearby sheep farmer and with no electricity or running water, with no distractions, Peter left the world behind. His brothers would refer to him at this point as the “hermit”.

GRACE

Late in the day on July 12, 1974, just before sunset, it happened. Suddenly, completely unexpectedly, an event occurred in Peter's life that was profound. Undeniable and unmistakable, Peter had an encounter with God. On this particular afternoon, as he looked out over the patchwork green hills and valley below, as he did each day, as he returned from working among the sheep, thinking he was alone and preferring to be so, something was very different struck Peter. Not from without. Not a bolt of lightning, not a symbolic pattern in the clouds above. Not an audible voice making some deific declaration. No, what Peter experienced that day was none of those things. Rather there came a moment, from deep within his own heart, that flooded him with the overwhelming realization of the reality of God. A God who loved and understood him with such a depth and completeness that it covered Peter and all he had ever experienced. Every thought he had ever had, all that he had felt was covered in a peace, like the blanket of snow that, in the winter, covers these very mountains upon which he gazed.

This peace was a knowing, though not from his mind. It was a knowing that there was a purpose for where he had been and a plan for where he would yet go. Peter felt his soul had been infused with grace and love. It came silently, perfectly and completely into his heart. It was a birth, to be sure. He was Peter, not someone else. Still, Peter would never be the same again.

NEW FRIENDS

On a bitterly cold January day, Peter put on his snowshoes and trekked down the mountain to visit a nearby farm. He had eyed this farm many times. It shone in the distance with uncanny warmth.. It seemed somehow different than the average Vermont farm. Peter's need to be alone was changing. Curious, he was compelled (or guided) to pay this farm a visit. What Peter found was an amazing family of Austrian immigrants with six children, all around his own age. He was invited to stay for dinner and soon realized why he had been so drawn to this special place.

This was a family of faith! These were the first people hear and to understand what Peter had experienced that day on the mountain. They, too, had had an encounter with grace and had an acute awareness of God's presence. Peter began to work with them on their farm. These would be some of the best days of his life! Working in the woods, logging, haying the golden fields in summer, maple sugaring in the first days of spring or milking the very needy cows, along with the camaraderie of these new friends made these days sweet. Life was good.

Every morning after the first chores of the day were done, all would head for the "back room". Peter had no idea what work could possibly be accomplished in this small place. Much to his surprise, his new found family began to pray. Quiet, personal prayers of request, prayers of thanksgiving for blessings already received, Bible readings and songs – so many songs!

After many mornings in that back room, Peter one day became aware of whom these people were. Here too, he heard a story of one man's faith that left an indelible mark upon his spirit. These were members of the vonTrapp family, the subjects of the famous musical and movie, The Sound of Music. Werner vonTrapp told Peter some of the story that went untold in the movie. Fleeing the Nazi occupation in Austria and arriving in America, the family settled in the Stowe area. Werner was not content to know that his fellow countrymen were fighting the fight of their lives. So he enlisted in the Army as an American in the 10th Mountain Division to do what he could toward the liberation of Europe.

Before heading off to war, Werner prayed. He prayed for his safe return and promised God that if he should return to see his family again in these peaceful hills of Vermont, that he would build a small chapel as lasting memorial of the goodness of God. The chapel would also be a symbol of Werner's own love for this graceful God. Werner did indeed return and kept his promise. (The chapel stands to this day on the hill behind the Trapp Family Lodge.)

Hearing the story, in that back room, Peter's heart was ablaze. Then, in his typical quiet, understated manner, Werner said to Peter, "What are you going to do?"

THE JOURNEY CONTINUES

Perhaps it was wanderlust, perhaps the hand of God, but Peter left that little mountain cabin and set out in search of what he was "supposed to do". For the next five years, Peter roamed from coast to coast, riding the rails, hitchhiking from the east to Alaska and down the west coast. He spent time in mining towns, hobo camps, fishing villages, ranches and cities. He learned about humanity, about love and loss, faith and doubt. He learned every day about mankind...and God.

While in the majestic Tetons (again drawn to the mountains), Peter spent several nights in a small log chapel that has truly heavenly views. After six nights of contemplation and prayer, Peter knew what he was to do.

ANOTHER ROAD

Miles away, another young heart was hitchhiking from one life in search of another. Seventeen year old Amy Marlette would quietly leave her home one day, taking with her a few clothes and a heart full of hope. She was hoping for a better life; a life that made sense; a life where the rug would never again be pulled out from under her.

Growing up as the youngest of three, home life for Amy was middle-class-everything-ok-on-the-outside. There was a nice home, the best education and friends. But it was all negated by a daily appearance of the alcoholic demon that would await her each day as she came home from school. Alcoholism devoured any potential the family had for success. Loving parents were incapable of loving. Addicted siblings provided the wrong influence. Confusion, disappointment and heartbreak became the order of the day.

Eventually, Amy had to make a critical decision. She could remain in this swirl of life spiraling downward, out of control, or she could dare to leave it all behind, seek another way and start over. Succumb or survive. Unknown to Amy, the hand of God was reaching out, stretching with desire to rescue her from the destructive path down which she was heading.

One day, God spoke to Amy, though she wouldn't know it until much later. On a particularly bad day, after having yet another family meltdown at home which escalated into physical abuse, Amy went to school in a state of depression. For some reason, one of Amy's teachers gave her some unsolicited advice. This teacher was not, to Amy's knowledge, a religious person. They weren't speaking about philosophical things, nor were they discussing any of her problems. Yet this teacher was moved to say words to her that would change the course of her life.

In the hallway, on what seemed to be a normal day to everyone but her, this teacher told Amy that when she went home on this particular day, she might want to try "praying". That was it. Again, no lightning, no voice from above; but something stirred within Amy like never before. It was as if she had forgotten she was the holder of the "Get-Out-of-Jail-Free" card in a game of Monopoly. It was a door that opened when all others had been closed. It was a *real* option that she had overlooked. She had been to church, raised a Catholic. She had made First Holy Communion and lasted long enough to make her Confirmation, just so she could get the parents off her back. Confirmation confirmed nothing, except that she no longer had to attend church, for which she was extremely grateful.

But this call to prayer was different. This was a chance for Amy to really spell things out to God. In her "relationship" to God through the church, it had been the other way around. God had spelled things out, alright. That afternoon, Amy arrived home, dumped her backpack in the kitchen and proceeded upstairs to her room. Closing the door, she began her rant. "OK God, if you're out there..." She didn't get much further. That was all He needed.

The peace that flooded her soul that day, was medicinal, to say the least, without any of the bad taste. It was relief that was palpable. She didn't know what to do. She couldn't move, wouldn't move, NEVER wanted to move. The tears flowed and a thought entered her mind and spirit simultaneously: "The future will take care of itself". It wasn't *her* thought. She had never had thought that before. She couldn't. But here it was. And for the first time, she allowed herself to think it.

Over the course of the next couple of months, the situation grew worse, but Amy became braver in the possibility of there being a future that might not include heartbreak and betrayal and violence. When the opportunity arose, Amy was gone. With a lump in her throat that was surely visible to any bystander, she left her life behind trusting that the future would indeed take care of itself.

Carrying whatever she could scrounge together stuffed into her Kelty pack, Amy was also drawn to the mountains. Setting out for New Hampshire, her “future” took her to a place that was most unexpected. Feeling as though family was the source of all her misery, where did she end up but with a family? There were parents and kids her age...the LAST thing she thought she needed. Yet God was clearly many steps ahead of her. This family would become, with God’s love and grace, the source of her recovery and healing. They too, were a family of faith and showed Amy a world she had never known.

Loving parents were capable of guiding and supporting the family members. Siblings worked and laughed together- without alcohol! Then, to top it all off, they prayed and read the Bible. Amy felt as though she were on a different planet. She wasn’t accustomed the climate; she didn’t know the language; she wasn’t outfitted for this place. Yet each night as she lay down her head, she felt safe and loved and hopeful. She hadn’t felt that way since early childhood. God was present. Grace was working.

After living with this family for one year, a year in which she grew in her faith in God and man, Amy was lead to another, special place. The “future was taking care of itself” and Amy moved to the Green Mountains of Vermont, anxious to share her newfound faith and help others.

CONVERGING PATHS

There is no other explanation. Divine providence would cause the paths of Peter and Amy to cross. Prayer meetings were frequent, informal events in those days in the late ‘70s. They took place in peoples’ homes. Enthusiastic and enlightened, people assembled just to “praise the Lord”, offering up thanks and worship with heartfelt songs and prayers. Hands were lifted; musical lyrics were serenely introspective or rowdy and loud. Either way, a prayer meeting was not to be missed. It was in this setting that Peter and Amy were introduced. Two souls who had seen more heartbreak than they cared to admit; but they had survived in the most wonderful way, by the grace of God.

At this point, Peter enrolled in seminary studies and began to delve into the truths that his experience had already proven to him on the mountainside years before. He yearned to learn all that he could so that he could relate the experience to others who were searching for the grace of God. Amy, also wanting to help others who were struggling to find their way into a new future, went into the mission field.

These were the days of a long-distance relationship that would have long-lasting effects on them both. In the fall of 1986, this unlikely pair was married and their separate dreams became one. They began a ministry to bring to others the work of God’s amazing grace that was so much a part of their lives.

MORE DIVINE INTERVENTION

The couple relocated away from the mountains to a small town outside of Boston. They purchased a small house and began immediately the work of bringing forth grace. Prayer meetings and communion services were held in the basement, which had been converted to a chapel. It was set up in the spirit of the early “duomo”, the name for the first meeting places of the first Christians. It means “home church”. Peter supported the family with his work as a carpenter. The three children that they had didn’t think anything at all about the many people who came to their home at different times of the day and night. And everyone loved the children.

An unplanned and unexpected series of events occurred that would have a profound impact on the formation of Grace Church. In 1996, Mother Theresa of Calcutta visited Boston. Peter had received an invitation to go and hear her speak, which he was quick to accept. At the end of the service, Peter was ushered into a room where she stood, so small and larger than life at the same time. Following those ahead of him, he knelt first, then rose to greet her. Peter’s inability to speak gave her the opportunity to speak to him words that he would bury in his heart. She said that he was to “Bring a blessing to the church” and that he should simply “Teach Jesus”. These words were for Peter a commission that has carried him through many doubtful moments. But they were words that would be confirmed in another most unlikely meeting.

Later that year, Peter was invited to meet with Pope John Paul II at the Vatican in Rome. The work of grace! During this private audience the Pope blessed Peter and instructed him emphatically to “Bring revival to the church” and to “Pray for the day when all people will be able to worship God together”.

A familiar theme was emerging. Like so long ago, when God spoke to St. Francis to “Rebuild My Church”, the church of that day was a church without grace and had fallen into spiritual disrepair. Legalism was the order of the day and the spirit of God’s grace was squelched entirely. So today, it is time to rebuild. As when St. Francis met the Pope of his day, Peter approached this meeting as a simple believer who had experienced something great and life-changing- the grace of God that goes beyond man made rules and doctrine.

GROWING

As the ministry grew, they found themselves needing to rent larger facilities. This proved to be inadequate as well. A space was needed that would become “home” for the growing congregation. Finally, after years of searching all over New England, another sign of grace appeared. The property located adjacent to the little house in Dover came on the market. Without a lot of resources, the prospect of being able to purchase this rundown horse farm seemed slim. Yet the future would indeed take care of itself yet again. After making a pitiful offer for the property, the owner agreed to sell at the price the DiSantos had given. The money saved on the low offer would get the project well on its way.

Upon informing the small congregation that they had just purchased what was, in effect, a “dump”, they excitedly praised God for his beneficence and got to work. This would be the place. A place like Werner vonTrapp had built so many years before – a testament to the goodness of God and of the love of two people for their God- two people whom God had brought safely home. Glory to God!

THE WORK

The original plans which had been drawn called for the complete demolition of the dilapidated house to make way for the new church. It soon became apparent that this was not to be the case. Peter and Amy both agreed that the greatest work of God is never demolition, but restoration. As they had both experienced first hand, God would get much more glory in the transformation of the old run down house into something strong and useful. The structure would be saved.

It didn't seem like a difficult thing to build a church. They had a site, some money with which to get started and enthusiastic volunteers willing to do their part for God. Yet before the permit to build would be issued, state regulations and code issues for this now “public” building project would complicate things somewhat.

The plan was simple enough – construct a small church in a year's time for about \$100K. The reality would prove to be not nearly so simple, or timely or cheap. Nevertheless, with great zeal, excitement and naiveté, the couple broke ground in February of 1997. Architects would draw and redraw plans. Structural engineers would be required before anything could possibly be approved. Mechanical and electrical engineers, civil engineers- all working (overtime) to ensure that the structure would be safe under any possible scenario short of Armageddon. There was even a landscape architect that was required by the state to draw the parking lot and the placement of adequate shrubbery to make all aesthetically pleasing. This was surely not the case for those constructing the very first “Duomo”.

This would inevitably take its toll. Three months into the project, the money was gone.

OPPOSITION

The joy of building a church for the glory of God was also to be short lived, as support for the project was in short supply. Hostility was aroused by a neighbor who began a letter writing campaign to stop the project cold. The letter stated that the church would “ruin” the neighborhood and decrease property values. Apparently they had forgotten that it had been a run down horse farm with a barn falling down and vermin everywhere. There was also the concern that it might become a place where teenagers would want to spend time as well as “needy” people. Peter and Amy could only hope for as much.

The clergy of the town were not exactly the wealth of support that Peter and Amy had anticipated. Upon presenting his fellow clergy with the exciting news of a new church being built in this small town, they didn't even attempt to hold back their anger and hostility. "You can't build a church wherever you want!" said the longest standing clergy member among them. "We'll see about this."

LAY UP FOR YOURSELVES TREASURE IN HEAVEN...

The 1st of March was a drizzly, cold day. The house was full of filth and debris that needed to be tossed out. The dumpster was situated alongside the house so that the old insulation, plaster, wood trim etc. could easily be thrown from a window into the huge container. A young man was helping with this less than desirable task. He came from the attic with a couple of heavy boxes that he found beneath the insulation between the floor joists. Planning to drop from the window, he decided to take a look first and see why they were so heavy. Much to his shock, the one of the boxes was filled with silver coins and some jewelry. Not any coins, but silver dollars from the 1800s! This was sold and the construction project inched along a little further. Thank you, Lord!

In all, seventy two truckloads of debris were removed from that old house, about 120 tons. The structure was stripped to the core, cleansed, in a way. The bare frame of the house had a beautiful, strong timber frame core that couldn't be seen through all the darkness that had covered it. God was teaching this small band of workers about how skilled he is at restoring even the damaged and dirty parts of our lives.

THE FOUNDATION

The foundation of any structure is certainly the most important. In the case of this small farmhouse, the basement was a disgusting dumping area for miscellaneous junk, with a furnace that didn't work and a low ceiling that made one feel the pressing urge to get out as quickly as possible. The foundation was actually fine, but the height of the ceiling was much too low if there were ever to be usable space under the building. As for most churches, the lower level is an important place for meeting for a variety of functions. A large high-ceilinged basement had always been a part of the plan for the new church. The height of this ceiling was oppressive and would never do. Two options existed: raise the entire building, or, lower the floor and extend the foundation.

Neither option was particularly desirable, but the first was out of the question. So the digging began. Compacted earth that had been bearing the weight of the house since the 1920s was jack hammered away from underneath. Small sections, two feet deep, were dug away from underneath the actual concrete foundation. These were then filled in with new concrete. This backbreaking job took twenty one days. More spiritual parallels were being drawn with each shovelful of dirt. How strong is this Christ, the cornerstone laid by God himself in Zion!

TREES

Many people contributed in various ways during these days of building. Strangers would come by and present a check, or pick up a hammer and lend a hand. Women would appear with food and refreshments. It seemed there was always just enough help for the task at hand. Like the manna in the desert, it appeared, though only enough for that particular day...another lesson.

There was one person who contributed above and beyond to this work of God. Yet they would never set foot on the property and never actually see the finished work. A little, old, very wise woman was constantly at work on the project: Amy's great-great aunt, the only one from her family with whom she still had contact. Her assistance allowed the dream to go on. Prayer was her constant contribution. She was relentless and forceful in this, though you wouldn't expect the small framed woman in her late 80s to be anything but docile. Moral support was her forte. She seemed to have a PhD in making Amy and Peter feel as if they could and should be doing what they were doing and that nothing other than success lay before them.

Anna Lane, or Aunt Ann, as everyone knew her, had something else as well: a small piece of property in Jaffrey, NH upon which grew the most "regal" (that was her word) stand of red pine in the state. As the church was to be built with a natural timber frame, these trees fit the bill perfectly. As Anna herself said, "There is no nobler purpose for any tree, than to be used in the building of a church."

So Peter went to work. A total of 78 one hundred foot of the red pine trees were cut to be used in the new part of the building, the sanctuary, that would be added on to the original structure of the house. Other trees gave their life force to the project. A huge cherry tree growing on the property on which the church is built was felled, dried and made into boards that found their way to Peter's wood shop. This is where the hand of the craftsman went to work.

The cherry tree was transformed into the altar and pulpit. Measuring, cutting, carving, sanding and oils were used in the age old process. Oils that, when applied to the completed piece of furniture, brought the wood back to life as its rings and flecks glimmered like the leaves it used to carry would shimmer in a light breeze. Wood is an amazing thing, chosen by the Almighty as the vehicle for life and redemption of that life.

Bookcases, cabinets, flooring, wall paneling... wood everywhere! And of course, looking up, those old red pines have taken their place like the rafters in the stable that witnessed the birth of the Savior. They stand, they creak, they watch over those who enter the church, imparting their strength and enfolding everyone in their protective arms, like a visible sign of God himself. At least that's what people say.

EXCAVATION

Big machines moved tons of dirt effortlessly from behind the old house to make room for the new sanctuary and septic systems, (lest we forget). The foundation walls for the new part of the building had massive footings and were laced with costly reinforcing steel bars from top to bottom like a screen that was meant to keep out huge prehistoric bugs. When asked, the structural engineer who was responsible for this obvious excess said that he used the federal code for emergency fallout shelters because in his words, “You never know.” Let’s hope not. Ironically, he never sent an invoice for his part, probably assuming that his demand for extra materials would put the project over the top.

The day before Thanksgiving trucks arrived to pour liquid rock inside wooden forms that would become walls- walls that would eventually support the new structure and be witness to the transformation of many lives. If walls could talk...

The red pines were shaped into trusses and arrived on a truck. Wooden pegs were hammered into place to secure them for eternity. The kids got to perform this task. Raising heavy mallets with two hands, they pounded on the giant Lincoln Logs. Then, one by one, they were suspended in mid air by the long arm of a crane until they came to rest in their predetermined places. The men who were part of the framing crew said that no timber frame should ever be covered up, but that they should just stand, bare and beautiful so that their worth would always shine. So it was that they never stayed for the next crew to come in and sheath them. Their job was done and they were right. The righteous presence of each truss was breathtaking.

WINTER OF DISCONTENT

Winter was well on its way and with it a series of disappointing setbacks. Friends who offered, no, *promised*, to help never showed up. The cold was numbing. Most days it was colder inside the structure than outside, as is often the case with an unheated space. Cold was trapped inside and so was Peter. Working now for an entire year, the end was as yet imperceptible. The lack of money was a constant concern as chilling as the winter days. Living on borrowed money made things more dismal than a winter in the Arctic Circle. The dream was becoming a nightmare.

To make ends meet, Amy had begun bagging groceries while the kids were in school. The youngest, Jake, was at Peter’s side daily, with his kid sized tool belt and jean jacket. Peter developed tendonitis in both elbow’s making each swing of the hammer or pass with the sander a reason to stop. But stopping was not an option. He had taken four days off in the last year. Now the children were asking him the tough questions, “When will it be done? We want our daddy back!” Their voices caused him more pain than the swollen tendons in his arms.

There were many voices that winter. Voices that told them they were crazy. Voices that said they should quit. One person told Peter he was either completely insane or completely consumed in his love for God. Peter and Amy raised their own voices to God,

questioning, pleading, and searching for the answers. Mostly the answers were from Aunt Ann, calling the work noble, encouraging the two every step of the way and pointing out the beginnings of a downward slide of other religious institutions, her own religious institution. The old woman saw some kind of writing on the wall. She was the flame that lit many a darkened day.

There were days they weren't sure. The doubts and discouragement mounted. The words of the song in the movie about St. Francis echoed in Amy's mind, "If you want your dream to be, take your time go slowly. Day by day, stone by stone, build your secret slowly. Do few things but do them well; simple things are holy." It was a song they had chosen to be sung at their wedding.

Peter was eating five meals a day and drinking endless pots of coffee when the bartering idea came to him. He just *had* to find another way He would present it to the electrician whose costs were somewhere around fifty thousand dollars. An easy going man with a good sense of humor, the electrician jumped at the chance to have some carpentry work done on his home when this job was completed. They shook hands, payment was deferred and Peter went back to work. It would cost him 400 hours of additional work after the completion of the church! But for now, all was right with the world and he could continue.

As the winter slowly passed, so did their beloved Aunt Ann. At 91 the dear woman went to be with the God she knew well and loved well in her lifetime. Shortly before her death, Peter was at her side in the nursing home where she had spent the last couple of years. Peter remarked that he only wished that she had been able to see the church for herself. "Oh, I've *seen* the church", she said. "It's *beautiful!*"

All who knew her lost a good friend that day, for Aunt Ann had the ability to make a person feel as if they were the center of the universe. Her interest in whomsoever she might be speaking with was as keen as a knife. For Amy, she was the closest connection to family. Though truly, God had given her a new family and that family would continue to grow through the ministry of Grace Church.

Aunt Ann left Amy a small amount of money which, of course, went toward building supplies.

TEACH THE CHILDREN

From the very beginning, it was always understood that the church would include a space for children. The idea of a preschool made perfect sense and would fulfill the words of Jesus who asked that the little children be allowed to come to him. Little Angels Preschool would be a room added to the side of the old part of the house. While framing that part of the building, another donation came in that would take the project through the winter. God seemed to be pleased.

WINDOWS TO THE SOUL

Long before the general population could read or write, the stories of the gospel message were depicted in various forms of art, including stained glass. To support herself in the mission field, Amy had been fortunate enough to work at several stained glass studios that specialized in stained glass restoration. It just so happened that at the time of the building of the church, there was a large cathedral in the Boston area that was being torn down. The stained glass windows were in storage and were for sale to other churches that might be interested. Now representing a church, (yes, they were beginning to believe it might come to pass), Amy and Peter were able to take a look at them.

Entering the large studio where they were stored, one of the windows was uncrated for them to look at. One hundred years old, blackened with the soot from candles lit for thousands of masses and incense whose smoke had drifted aloft only to settle on the tiny panes of glass, they beheld the windows in amazement. The broken pieces didn't prevent them from seeing, from *feeling*, the message depicted by this ancient panel. Jesus, his arm outstretched, was raising a young girl from her deathbed, much to the utter astonishment of her grief stricken parents. Was this not the message of Peter and Amy's lives? Could it be said any better? Grace inhabited a Body and power flowed from that Body to powerless people. It didn't happen in a church. It didn't happen to religious scholars, but to ordinary people who needed grace. Peter and Amy knew in that moment that these windows belonged in the church.

Amy began the tedious but rewarding task of repairing the windows. They would be carefully labeled and dismantled. Broken pieces were recut and replaced or repaired with a special glue made for that purpose. The most time consuming was the cleaning. Each piece had to be dipped in a special solution and carefully rubbed to remove one hundred years of grime without damaging the painting. Re-leading and soldering came only after months of repair work. The job took Amy two years of her "spare" time, working generally at night after the kids had gone to bed.

FURNITURE

Another large church in the area was closing and looking to get rid of the sacred furnishings – a sad sign of things to come. But God had a plan for these items as they found their way to Grace Church. Peter was quick to take what they no longer had need of and soon the church was well stocked beautiful candlesticks, a tabernacle and intricate carvings. Even the pews were being discarded! They were larger than what the space could handle, so Peter went to work cutting them down to size, reassembling and refinishing them.

By the winter of 1998 the exterior was nearly complete. The interior mechanicals were in place and the flooring, doors and cabinets were made and installed. Once again the money ran out. A trip to the local bank proved disastrous when Peter was told that the bank would sooner loan the money to a "toxic waste dump" than to a church. Where's George Bailey when you need him?

Shortly after that unproductive meeting, a friend of a friend of Peter and Amy stopped by to look at the project. He was able to put them in touch with the vice president of a small but growing bank. This kind man was a firm believer in the goodness of God and offered to make available whatever funds were needed to finish the job!

BELLS TOLLING

Since earliest times, bells have been used to summon the faithful in many faith traditions. Bells have often been called the voice of God. A new church bell can cost tens of thousands of dollars. This, of course, was out of the question. An old bell was found by Peter after two years of searching. It was in another church that was slated to be torn down. It was located in Missouri and had been cast in the early 1800s. It rang every day for the fallen during the civil war.

Nearing the end of the project, a tractor trailer brought the bell to the church. Peter had constructed a tower for the bell on the ground – its own little house from which it would yet again ring out and summon people to meet with God. On top of the little structure was placed an iron cross, beautifully ornate with curlicues proving the skill of the craftsman who made it. This, too, had history, coming from a convent in Belgium, where the inhabitants had allegedly harbored fleeing Jews. The convent had been destroyed in the war, but the cross remained.

The bell tower was lifted high into the air against a deep blue sky and placed as a finishing touch on this on this small, unassuming church. As it rose up and found its proper place, it became clear that God had planned every aspect of the construction of Grace Church. Everything *was* in its proper place which the Master Builder had determined at the outset. As churches closed all around, God would find a place for his holy things and prepare a place for the most important of all, his people.

THE JOURNEY OF GRACE

On Sunday, April 11, 1999 Grace Church was dedicated to the glory of God. After two and a half years of hard work and perseverance, the physical work was at an end. Now the real work of Grace would begin, as it continues to this day. A building and its furnishings have been restored. They have found their proper place, the reason for which they were created and so it is with the people of God who come through its doors. Lives are transformed and restored, faith is reborn and renewed.

In this day when many churches are closing their doors, Grace Church flings hers open. Men and women on their journey in life can find there a place where God's love is readily available, no matter where one's paths have taken them. Grace Church is so much more than a building; it's a place to meet with God; a simple place, a place of comfort and peace, where the presence of God is easily felt. It was built as a labor of love and now that love flows out from it.

Grace Church is not an institution. It may have been built by human hands, but it is truly a work of the divine, offering a testimony to the love of God for all his people as they go along their own journey of grace.

Glory to God in the highest!

Text by Amy DiSanto
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