



The Christian life is a journey.

*TrailNotes* speaks to forward movement, paying attention to the “landscape” we are passing through in this trail-laced, wooded hillside and valley, not to mention the world beyond. **TrailNotes** is an unfolding, ongoing journal of the people who share the trail with us and the things we’re learning and doing.

## ElderTalk: The Power of Choice

ERIC BYROM

Recently my son Travis was assigned to read the novel “The Giver” by Lois Lowry in his middle school English class. This book paints the picture of a future Utopia which is in fact a Dystopia. The society in the book has strived to take away pain and strife by converting to “sameness,” a plan that has also removed emotional depth from their lives. The answer that the society in the book has chosen removes choice and agency from people’s lives. I’ll leave the end of the book for you to read, but it does raise some questions about this idea of agency.

The definition of the word ‘agency’ used as a noun is, “The capacity, condition, or state of acting or exerting power.” It is often thought of in terms of someone having the power to choose something in his or her life. With the power of choice comes the power to choose wisely or foolishly.

Our theme this year is “Use your freedom in Christ to love God and others well.” This corresponds to one of Grace Fellowship’s core values of relationship to God and others. In this idea of relationship, we have the power to choose to love well or be lackluster in our love. Much of the New Testament is extorting us to choose well. So, what are the barriers to choosing to love God and others well?

This is a good philosophical question and probably has many answers. Let’s look at a few of them today. First, the Golden Rule says, “Do unto others as you would have them do to you.” This implies that in order to love others well we must first know how to love ourselves well.

So, how can we love ourselves well? Self-help

books? Self-help books abound at giving answers to this. If I look at what the Bible says about this, it becomes apparent that understanding how God loves us gives us a good place to start.



God sent His only Son to take on human flesh and to die in our place. Jesus took our penalty for sin so that our relationship with God the Father could be restored.

Secondly, the Bible also talks about the fact that humans are made in the image of God. It is this being made in God’s image that makes every human being valued and worth saving.



*Hands of God and Adam - from The Creation of Adam by Michelangelo (circa. 1512)*

Thirdly, this also gives us a concept of God as a loving Father who wants a relationship with us. We can pursue that relationship now because the

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## The Power of Choice *(Continued from p. 1)*

barrier between God and us has been removed if we have trusted Christ. Thus, we can now love God well.



God the Father (1750)  
by Giovanni Battista Piazzetta (1682-1754)

We also now can choose to love others well. All people are worth saving and are made in the image of God. This makes them extremely valuable, unique, and worthy of being loved well.

Each of us has “agency” or the power to choose to pursue loving ourselves, and loving God and others well. This power comes from the fact that Jesus has given us that power if we have made Him our Savior and Lord.

2 Peter 1:3 says, “*His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who called us to His own glory and excellence.*” God has given us the power or agency through our calling in Christ to love well. Let’s avail ourselves of that power and choose to do this each day!

### Grace Fellowship Church

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Eric Byrom Presiding Elder/ Pastor

Jadaé Fox Elder

Matt Godsil Elder

(A complete list of church functionaries will return next month)

## Oh Spoken Word

by John Caldwell

12/24/24

hear the words  
hear the  
thoughts behind the words  
no matter the accent  
no matter the perspective  
Give Honor  
to the life from which  
they come  
Listen  
Ponder  
Engage

**CONNECTING!**

‘Tis a gift.



## Will the real St. Valentine please stand up!

JOHN KURTZ

Those of you who were “of viewing age” back in the 1950s and 60s will no doubt remember the TV program “What’s My Line.” One wonders if the subject of this article could have stumped the panel of that show. Quite possibly. St. Valentine is a name we all are very familiar with. However, he is someone most of us actually know very little about. Because Valentine’s Day falls in the middle of February, I felt it a good time for us all to become better informed about this man, whose name remains “big business” in our stores and results in a variable, but not inconsiderable, drain on our wallets nearly two thousand years since he lived.

St. Valentine, born in about 226 AD in the Italian city of Interamma, whose given name and early life has been lost to history, became a priest in the early church and eventually the Bishop of Terni, outside of Rome. He was serving in this latter role during the brief period that Claudius II, no friend of the Christians, was Emperor of Rome. At this time in history, Rome was suffering from a manpower

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## Abundance Is for Everyone

Andrew Wilson

Christians love the theme of divine abundance. We love talking about the bounty of God, the overflow of the Spirit, and the extravagant riches of Christ. We are more likely to name our churches *Abundant Life* than *Main Street Bible Church*. Our songs and prayers reflect a confidence that God will surpass our expectations by a country mile.

From a distance, this conviction can be misunderstood. Many associate it with an unhealthy interest in money. And at its worst, the language of fullness and abundance can be (and has been) distorted to promise material comfort to those who believe enough, declare enough, or give enough.

But there is no need to throw the baby out with the bathwater. At its best, celebrating divine abundance simply reflects the emphasis in Scripture, the garden filled with fruit, the land flowing with milk and honey, the temple festooned with gold and purple, or the mighty crystal river cascading from God's throne, bringing healing and fruitfulness wherever it goes.

In particular, divine abundance reflects the emphasis of John's Gospel. Most of us are familiar with John 10:10, where Jesus declares, "I have come that they may have life and have it to the full." This is not an incidental or isolated remark. Coming halfway through the Gospel, it is sandwiched between two "I am" statements: "I am the gate" and "I am the good shepherd" (verse 11). Jesus pictures Himself as a doorway to salvation and a shepherd laying His life down for His flock, and between these images comes the key contrast between His ministry and that of the "thieves and robbers" who came before Him (verse 8). They came to take; He comes to give. They sought destruction; He seeks abundance.

John's signs are repeatedly expansive and needlessly generous. Individuals are healed after being paralyzed for 38 years (John 5:1-9), being blind since birth (John 9:1-7), or even being dead for 4 days (John 11:38-44). Over 150 large fish are summoned from the deep, caught, and barbecued (John 21:11). John suggests that all the books in the world couldn't possibly contain them (John 21:25).

JOHN COULD NOT  
POSSIBLY BE CLEARER:  
**JESUS IS FULL OF  
GRACE AND TRUTH,  
SPIRIT AND JOY,  
BREAD AND WINE,  
LIGHT AND LIFE,  
WORKS AND WATER.**

We learn that Jesus "speaks the words of God," who gives "the Spirit without limit" (John 3:34). We learn that He comes to grant a "spring of water welling up to eternal life" (John 4:14), to do "greater works than these so that you will be amazed" (5:20), to bequeath "rivers of living water" for people to drink (John 7:38). He compares Himself to "a seed that dies and bears much fruit as well" (John 12:24 ESV) and a vine in whom His disciples abide and bear much fruit, "so well that joy may be complete" (John 15:11). Even in Jesus' death we see blood and water pouring out of His body, streams of living water flowing from His innermost being (John 19:34).

John could not make it clearer. Jesus is full of grace and truth, Spirit and joy, light and life, works and water, and fish and fruit. Divinity professor David Ford puts it this simply in his recent commentary: *John is a Gospel of abundance*.

Perhaps we emphasize divine abundance too much. Maybe our obsession with material wealth and welfare results from too much time reflecting on God's fullness. My suspicion, however, is the exact opposite: that we grab what we can because we think our Father's resources will run out. Only by reflecting on His bounty—vats of wine, baskets of bread, the grace upon grace—do we cultivate lives that are generous and hearts that are filled with joy unspeakable. As Jesus says in Matthew 10:8, "Freely you have received, freely give."

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at King Church of London, England.  
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*I have come that they may have  
**LIFE**  
and have it to the full.  
John 10:10*

## The Real St. Valentine...

(Continued from page 2)

drain due to its many years of war with the Goths to the north and Persians in the east. Claudius decreed that men of military age could no longer be engaged or married—so that their service to the empire would not be affected by a longing for a fiancée or wife at home!

Bishop Valentine disagreed and continued to secretly marry Christian couples. When Claudius learned of this, he had Valentine arrested. When Valentine refused to recant his own faith and desist in his priestly duties, he was imprisoned. Even while incarcerated, he continued to witness to his faith and minister to other imprisoned Christians. Having previously also been given the gift of healing, Valentine was even miraculously able to restore sight to the eyes of a jailer's blind daughter. This resulted in the conversion of the jailer and his entire family, all incurring the wrath of the Emperor.

Valentine was thus condemned to death by stoning and flogging. When that wasn't enough to end his life, Valentine was finally beheaded on February 14, 270 AD. Shortly prior to this final blow, Valentine was somehow able to write a message to the young girl whose vision had earlier been restored: "From your Valentine." That, perhaps, was the origin of sending valentine greetings to those we love.

For his devotion to the faith and martyrdom because of it, Valentine was held in high regard by the Church over the centuries. Some time around 496 AD, he was

### February 2025

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2025	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	2025
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	16	17	18	19	20	21	22		
	23	24	25	26	27	28			

- 1 Games Reach Family Game Night, at GFC, 6:30 to 8:30 PM.**
- 2 Pastor Eric Byrom preaching on 1 Peter 4:7-11.**
- 5, 12, 19, 26 Connect groups for all ages, 6:30 to 8:00 PM.**
- 6, 20 Women of Grace meet to pray, GFC Lion Room, 9:00 to 10:00 AM.**
- 9 David Lane (guest pastor from Wadsworth, Ohio) preaching on 1 Peter 4:12-19.** 
- 16 Elder Jadaé Fox preaching on 1 Peter 5:1-5.**
- 22 Celebration of Life service for Brian Judd, GFC, 1:00 PM.**
- 23 Tom Russell preaching on 1 Peter 5:6-11.**   
**Community meeting, 6:30 to 8:00 PM.**

given his own feast day by the Church. Since then he has been considered as a Saint by the Church, even after the division of East (Roman Catholic) from West (Eastern Orthodox) and then the Reformation (Lutherans and Anglicans). The Western churches considered the date as February 14, while the Eastern bodies chose to hold it on July 6.

Valentine is still considered to be a saint of the Church by the liturgical bodies today although the celebration of his "day" is no longer mandatory, due to a bit of

uncertainty over exactly who he really was.

You see, we're not the only ones who might be somewhat "under-informed." Regardless of who the "real St. Valentine" actually was, there is no doubt about there having been such an individual in the early Church. He was was a prime example of showing Christian love, sacrifice for the cause of Christ, and devotion to his brethren and flock. Now, just remember that when you send your valentines or give a gift this Valentine's Day! 