

Grace by Federal Express: A small kindness

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [July 14, 2009](#) issue

Harsh things happen in the world with numbing frequency. So when somebody does something kind and thoughtful, we really ought to celebrate it. Here is my cause for celebration: Last January I was in Florida to visit family and to preach and lecture at two churches. Along the way I lost a book: William Placher's *Jesus the Savior*, which I had taken along to prepare for preaching in Lent. As many of you know, Placher was an editor at large for this magazine. Until his untimely death last November, he was a beloved professor at Wabash College in Indiana. Bill was a personal friend as well. When he spent part of a sabbatical year at the University of Chicago he was a regular worshiper at the church I serve, and he generously agreed to teach adult education classes and led a retreat for our staff. I was honored when he asked me to write an endorsement for *Jesus the Savior*, and I tucked his very gracious handwritten thank-you note into my copy of the book.

So I was more than normally unhappy when, after arriving home, I couldn't find the book, which contained my under lining and notes—and Bill's personal note to me. I called family members to see if I had left the book with them. I could remember reading the book at both of the homes I had stayed in. They hadn't seen the book. I suggested ominously to my spouse that her brother might have stolen the book. I rooted through every nook and cranny of suitcases and my briefcase. I called the motels in which I had stayed. Sadly, I acknowledged that the book was probably gone.

Then an e-mail came to the Christian Century from a man named Joel Blackburn, who said he worked at the Phoenix airport as a ramp agent and cabin services cleaner. He wrote: "In the course of my job, I recently discovered a book entitled *Jesus the Savior* by one William C. Placher. It had enclosed within it a business card through which I was able to acquire this e-mail address and a note which appeared to be very personal. It seemed to me that, especially given the nature of the note, Mr. Buchanan might want this book returned to him. That's what I'm attempting to

do if John Buchanan is still available at this e-mail address so that I might return to him what he's lost. Thank you, Joel."

The mystery was solved. My brother-in-law was off the hook. Apparently I had placed the book in the plane's seatback pocket, along with the magazines, where it remained for who knows how long, flying back and forth across the country until Joel Blackburn found it in Phoenix. I responded immediately to Joel's e-mail, telling him how pleased I would be to have the book back and that I would be happy to reimburse him for the postage. His response: "Wow. I didn't expect to hear back from you so quickly. . . . Don't worry about the postage. I think a few bucks is worth spending for a moment such as this. Happy to be of service. Joel."

The book arrived by Federal Express. It's back on my shelf. I ignored Joel's advice and reimbursed him for postage and a little more—a small token of my considerable gratitude. I know Bill Placher would have enjoyed this story. And I'm pleased to celebrate an act of kindness which for me became a moment of grace, thanks to a good man in Phoenix, Joel Blackburn.