Confusing grace

By John P. Leggett
April 3, 2016

Grace may be amazing, but it can also be confusing.

It was that confusing grace that surrounded me the other day while standing in a parking lot in Montreat, North Carolina. And it showed up so unexpectedly that it left me scrambling for words.

The day before, I had traveled to Montreat to visit cherished friends who were there for vacation. It had been far too long since we had been together, and their patient invitations finally convinced me that my presence would not be an interruption to their time away.

After we had spent 25 hours together, I prepared to leave. Before getting into my car, I hugged them both, and when our embrace ended, I spoke the only words that made sense of our time together: “It was a gift.”

“It was,” Kim said. “Thanks for giving it.”

And those words made no sense to me. I don’t know whether they noticed, but Kim’s response disoriented me so much that I struggled for words.

Now I have known Kim long enough to know that she is almost always right. And so I spent the drive home reflecting on her words, “Thanks for giving it.”

And that just didn’t seem right. How could she have been so confused? I had given nothing. I had only received.

As I drove toward home, I analyzed the past 25 hours, breaking them down into isolated moments, just snippets pulled from the fullness of our time, and the words I had spoken to them about our time together rang true. “It was a gift.”

And it was. In my mind, the remembered gifts sped past as quickly as the mileposts outside my window. The gracious invitation they extended. The welcoming embrace with which they greeted me upon my arrival. Cold beer. My favorite scotch. The first meal. A trip to the bookstore before closing so that I could pick up a book I had mentioned. A second meal. An evening spent talking as only old friends can do. The gentle way they received the words I shared. A late-night toast. Hot coffee prepared for me when I made my way downstairs after a wonderful night’s rest. The shared energy of writing together at a favorite coffee shop. A third meal. A walk along a flowing creek in one of the thinnest places on earth, ending in a parking lot where we stood to say goodbye.

And I spoke the right word: “It was a gift.”

“It was,” Kim said. “Thanks for giving it.”

And it still made no sense to me. I had given nothing. I had only received.

In my rearview mirror, I watched the evening sky explode into beauty as the sun set. And, in a moment of simple grace, words I had tucked away somewhere inside of me long ago sprang to my mind. They had been spoken by one of my favorite writers, Fred Craddock, and as his words filled my heart, they took me back to the place

where I had been standing a few hours before.

> "When you see two people standing, facing each other, and between them is a gift, and you don't know which one is giving it and which one is receiving it….that's a Christian act. Grace is receiving a gift. Grace is giving a gift."

We stood facing each other in that parking lot. And between us was a gift, a gift that we each believed the other had given. A gift that we each believed we had only received.

The gift was grace.

And while grace is sometimes downright confusing, even then, it is amazing.

Originally posted at Kairos Corner