

## **Holiness in Community: Creating a Culture of Grace and Truth**

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Christine D. Pohl

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I'm deeply grateful for this opportunity to share some thoughts about what it means to be a holy community. I love the picture of Jesus that John gives us in chapter 1--Jesus the Word who became flesh and lived among us, became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood as Eugene Peterson puts it. Holy God in human flesh, full of grace and truth. Jesus comes and lives among us—full of grace and truth. From his fullness, we have all received, John says, grace upon grace. Grace overflowing, from the fullness of God. Through him, through Jesus, grace and truth have come to us.

We know that Jesus is the Holy One who shows us and gives to us the beauty of holiness, the One who helps us to know what holiness looks like in relationships, the One who invites us into a holy community. When John introduces this Holy One to us, he chooses the language of grace and truth. And when Jesus, full of grace and truth, moves into the neighborhood, to create a holy people, that community will reflect and draw from the grace and truth of Jesus. A holy community is a community in which grace and truth are richly and powerfully practiced.

One way of getting our heads and hearts around the notion of holiness in community is to ask what it would mean to create a culture of grace and truth—what would it mean in our families, our churches, our seminary. What would it look like to be a community of grace and truth? These are concepts deeply connected to pictures in the Old Testament of God's covenant love and faithfulness—key dimensions of God's holiness. If we can deepen our understandings of what grace and truth and fidelity look like in relationships, I think we would be moving forward in understanding what it means to be a holy community. We would have a fuller sense of Wesley's concern about social holiness.

Most people want community—we want to belong to communities that are loving, grace-filled, life-giving, good. We want a place that is safe for growth, in which it is possible to be vulnerable, a place in which we can deal with brokenness and move toward healing. Communities, esp. Christian communities are places of deepest fulfillment and sometimes, disappointment. And certainly failed experiments in community litter the Christian landscape. But if you have ever tasted of vibrant, loving community, you know that that is what we were made for.

So what are the conditions for holy living in community? What are the practices that make holy living possible? I would say, at least for a start, that in holy communities, people keep their promises, they live truthfully, they live gratefully and hospitably. These four practices—promisekeeping or fidelity, truth-telling or truthfulness, gratitude and hospitality-- don't cover the waterfront—there are other central practices like discernment and forgiveness but time is limited and it seems to me that these four are central to creating a holy life together.

Actually, these are among the practices that make life in any community possible. But they are also closely connected to holiness, I would say they represent the relational dynamics of holiness. And I don't think it's too much of a stretch to think of them as the outworking of grace and truth—that together these four practices help us to operationalize our understandings of grace and truth.

So, where's the problem? If we want community, know we are made for community and know what is required, where's the problem? For a start, we haven't cultivated these requisite practices. In fact, often we find it easier to tell stories of betrayal and deception, than we do of faithfulness and truthfulness. Often we take fidelity and truthfulness for granted, though we certainly notice when these practices fail—the disappointments, the shattering of relationships, the loss of trust can be overwhelming.

Mostly in promisekeeping and truthtelling, we don't notice them when they are operating well. They are like the beams of a house—you don't pay attention to them unless they are disintegrating and the roof sags or the ceiling collapses (Doughty, 136). Communities--like houses --mostly disintegrate slowly. Like termites that eat away at a beam, small infidelities and deceptions eat away at community until there is nothing left to hold it up. So one of our tasks is to highlight the significance of these practices so we can cultivate them in community. If we overlook their significance, we're unlikely to be able to stand against the powerful cultural assault on fidelity and truthfulness. In a culture that is so much about spin and self actualization, fidelity and truthfulness can seem pretty outdated. But no community can survive with out them.

But neither can a community survive without practicing gratitude and hospitality. Communities collapse under the weight of grumbling and dissatisfaction, envy and presumption. Whether it's the children of Israel in the desert or your local church, grumbling and ingratitude are community killers. Once underway, they are almost impossible to address, eating away at a community, slowly sucking the life and joy out of it.

Communities that can't find a way to make room for strangers, that have grown so insulated and inward looking, so preoccupied with their own needs or struggles that they don't offer welcome are communities that are dying (Vanier, *Comm. & Growth*). In such communities, we find that when there is no room for strangers, there's increasingly little room for members either.

If the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is to bring and to be good news to the world, local churches will need to be winsome communities of grace and truth. In *Ancient-Future Faith*, Robert Webber writes that

The church is the primary presence of God's activity in the world. As we pay attention to what it means to be the church we create an alternative community to the society of the world. This new community, the embodied experience of God's kingdom, will draw people into itself and

nurture them in the faith. In this sense the church and its life in the world will become the new apologetic. People come to faith not because they see the logic of the argument, but because they have experienced a welcoming God in a hospitable and loving community” (p. 72).

Many Christian writers-- in addition to Webber-- are developing this emphasis on the apologetic significance and role of Christian community. In ethics, theology, and biblical studies there is fresh emphasis on the people of God, the social dimensions of the Kingdom and the new community of the church.

Faithful communities, faithful congregations, by their embodiment of grace and truth, proclaim an alternate way of life. Shaping grace and truth-filled congregations is difficult, however. A vibrant community is the most important apologetic for the gospel, but it is probably also the most difficult one to pull off. While we want community, we have been shaped by an individualistic, therapeutic and market-oriented culture. We are very wary of all of the commitments that are necessary to make a good life together. When things become difficult, pastors and congregation members often move on or move out, a response reinforced by the high mobility and consumer attitudes of the larger culture.

When we encounter difficulties in sustaining a shared life, we often look to therapeutic and business models to solve them, rather than looking at the deeper theological questions related to practicing the Christian life as a community. We're more inclined to check out the most recent management book than we are to reflect on questions of gratitude or fidelity in attempting to strengthen or straighten out staff relations. When small groups aren't working, we're more likely to blame dysfunctional personalities than to explore issues of truthfulness or hospitality. It's not that resources from the fields of business or psychology aren't helpful—they are—but they are not adequate, and the church has largely lost hold of its own language which is far richer for questions of life in community.

Some of you know that I've done quite a lot of work on the practice of hospitality as central to Christian identity and life together. It's actually from that work that this attention to other practices has come. As I interviewed practitioners of hospitality—people who welcome strangers day in and day out, and as I asked them about the challenges and blessings of their work, I was surprised by the number who said to me you can't do any sustained hospitality apart from a solid community but then they followed that insight by saying, “sustaining community is so much more difficult than welcoming strangers.” And I thought, oh my goodness.

So when I put their experience with the challenges of building and sustaining community alongside the recent enthusiasm for Christian community as a powerful contemporary apologetic, along with the fact that life in community is not optional for Christians, it is what integral to being followers of Jesus, I realized we need to look more closely at what sustains life together and what breaks it apart.

So, in the time we have today, all we can do is begin a conversation that is hopefully suggestive, that will get us thinking.

When life together is good, what does it look like? People enjoy spending time together, they welcome one another into their homes, bear one another's burdens, sense they belong. They share commitments and purpose and place, common tasks, common values, and out of that comes community. There's mutual accountability, forgiveness, shared meals, shared spiritual disciplines, freedom and commitment.

And there's a spirit of grace and gratitude. So I want to look at gratitude first as a response to the grace we have received. We come into community, as Dietrich Bonhoeffer notes, "not as demanders but as thankful recipients" because God has laid the foundation and has brought us together in Christ (*Life Together*, 28). The more thankfully we receive what has been given to us, the stronger and deeper our community grows.

So what does a grateful community look like? It is one that is deeply responsive to the goodness of God, rich in worship, where a certain level of thankfulness undergirds life together. In Chris Rice's and Spencer Perkins' words, such a community could be seen as "a culture of grace", "a beautiful land" (*Grace Matters*). In such a community, there is a faithful acknowledgment of contributions and gifts, but not a scrupulous paying back—as if it's some simple formula of debits and credits. There's lots of celebration, people and God are honored and appreciated. There is a spirit of respect. The practice of gratitude can be trivialized and reduced to a perfunctory thank you, but it is so much more. In a grateful community, there's lots of testimony to God's faithfulness through which the community experiences the joys of others; expressions of gratitude make the community alive to the Word and Spirit and to God's work.

A grateful community sees life as a gift and recognizes the inadequacy of any thanks that we might offer. It means we don't take things for granted, that we cultivate an awareness, an attentiveness to grace. What if we intentionally began each day with an expression of gratitude to God and those around us and ended the day by recounting the moments of grace and goodness? How might we and our communities be transformed if we were just more intentional about gratitude?

Simple words of thanks and acknowledgment can bestow blessing. I have a friend who is a pastor in Cincinnati who has reflected deeply on the significance of gratitude and retells stories of how moments of affirmation and gratitude in his church have been life-giving and grace-infused. He describes special, simple rituals of blessing that acknowledge what a person means to others—before they are dead and the words are delivered as a eulogy. He notes that after one of these times of deliberate blessing among the leadership team of the church, he was reduced to tears for hours because of the deep encouragement it represented. He writes,

Gratitude and affirmation are in short supply. Sadly, I must admit that I'm not only ingratitude's victim, but also its perpetrator. Often I have shrugged off gratitude while embracing discontent. Usually I can justify

this in the name of ‘vision’ or ‘unmet potential.’ That is until I read the following quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer [in *Life Together*]:

“We think we dare not be satisfied with the small measure of spiritual knowledge, experience and love that has been given to us, and that we must constantly be looking forward eagerly to the higher ground...we pray for the big things and forget to give thanks for the ordinary, small (and yet really not small) gifts. How can God entrust great things to one who will not thankfully receive from him the little things? If we do not give thanks daily for the Christian fellowship in which we have been placed, even when there is no great experience, no discoverable riches, but much weakness, small faith and difficulty’ if on the contrary, we only keep complaining that everything is so paltry and petty, so far from what we expected, then we hinder God from letting our fellowship grow according to the measure and riches which are there for us all in Christ Jesus.” (*Life Together*, 29)

Kevin continues,

I can only imagine if this advice were heeded by even a fraction of a local church-- the effects could be revolutionary. How many times have I wished I were somewhere else where God was REALLY moving? How many times have I longed to be in a more beautiful place (with mountains or an ocean) and abandon the urban neighborhood where I live? How many times have I fantasized about the perfect fellowship where everyone got along like a perfect family... It’s poison... Thankfully the antidote is available and accessible: equal parts of gratitude and affirmation.”  
(K.Rains, Vineyard Central Church)

There’s enormous insight in his remarks and he reminds us that gratitude can be undone in some disconcerting ways. When we yearn for some ideal of church or community, we can become deeply dissatisfied with what we have, always wanting more. We know that always wanting more is wrong re. possessions and money, but what about the size or success of our ministries, what about spiritual growth in ourselves or others or another mountaintop spiritual experience. Is it possible that always wanting more can be unhelpful? We walk a complex line between being grateful for what we have received and striving for excellence and growth.

Certainly, one of the most destructive intrusions into community life is envy—wanting what someone else has, and not wanting them to have it. It often reflects lack of confidence in our own giftedness and ingratitude for what we do have. But other deformations of gratitude also hurt life in community—a sense of entitlement, presumption, perpetual dissatisfaction, grumbling. It is impossible to sustain a community if it is being chipped away by ingratitude and dissatisfaction. But a community that practices gratitude and embodies thankfulness will be a life-giving, life-affirming place.

Turn now to the second practice we'll look at this morning: promisekeeping or fidelity. Today our culture and we are jaded about promises, partly as a result of the continual hype of advertising that makes promises about products none of us believe. Whether it's diet plans or new cars or new detergents or running shoes, the promises are often quite incredible. Think what has happened to our moral language when we don't even notice how odd it is that we use a furniture polish called pledge, margarine called promise, a supplement called ensure and then there are depends. Think of what has happened to key words associated with fidelity and how they have been trivialized.

Then think how we laugh at politicians who make impossible promises to whatever constituency they are currently courting and how we've also grown used to an extraordinary legal apparatus to make sure that individuals and companies both keep their promises and have legal ways to get out of them, whether it's marriage vows or refrigerator warranties.

Despite the current level of cynicism about possibilities of fidelity today, we still see expressions of promise keeping all around us; people continue to make and keep promises. Lewis Smedes observed, people "choose not to quit when the going gets rough because they promised once to see it through. They stick to lost causes. They hold on to a love grown cold. They stay with people who have become pains in the neck. They still dare to make promises and care enough to keep the promises they make. Smedes continues, "if you have a ship you will not desert, if you have people you will not forsake, if you have causes you will not abandon, then you are like God."

Rather a startling comment, but our God is a god who has made promises to us, who lives in covenant with us. And promise making, promise keeping, fidelity and commitment are central aspects of our relationship with God and God's relationship with us. And they are central to every human relationship. We live by faith, so why would faithfulness, keeping promises not also be the substance of our human relationships.

Promises take lots of forms: sometimes they are formal—like vows or oaths, or covenants—marriage and baptism, and so on. Often they are informal—the stuff of every day life—I'll be there at 10, I'll cook on Wednesday; I'll pick up the kids after church. There are explicit promises—ones we articulate to others and many that are implicit—unarticulated but somehow they set up expectations.

There are individual or personal promises and ones that are more corporate and institutionally embedded. There are conditional (I'll do this if... ) and unconditional promises. And then there are differences between covenantal and contractual understandings of promise, differences that are significant but we don't have time to explore today.

But, in general, think about what a promise does. Again to quote Smedes, "When a person makes a promise, she reaches out into an unpredictable future and makes one thing predictable: she will be there even when being there costs more than she wants to

pay. When a person makes a promise, he stretches himself out into circumstances that no one can control and controls at least one thing: he will be there no matter what the circumstances turn out to be.” (157).

Promises make an uncertain future more predictable; when kept, they foster trust, give a certain steadiness of purpose. They allow for dependability in relationships, even when we hit trouble spots. They are deeply connected to our ability to sustain hope. Promises safeguard us against our own inconsistencies and fickleness. They stabilize our love.

Promises set up expectations—often fairly ordinary expectations, but people arrange their behavior and choices based on these expectations and if promises fail, if we don’t keep them, experiences of betrayal and disappointment can be acute, depending on how important the promise was. But you know from experience with your own children, or with other kids, how easily disappointment and betrayal are experienced over what seem to us minor promises and even justifiable reasons for breaking them.

So promises set up expectations and promise making and promisekeeping, the structures of fidelity, are the stuff of human relationships. They are at the root of our ability to trust one another, and without some measure of trust, it is difficult to do much of anything. On the other hand, broken promises and betrayals are the stuff of tragedy, great and small, epic and very personal. Again, Smedes reminds us that life together survives not on a steady diet of warm feelings but on the tough fibers of promise keeping.

The context of our promisemaking is God’s love, integrity and faithfulness as well as the unpredictability of circumstances, our inability to fully know and control the future. Christian faith is rooted in promises, Christians see ourselves as people of the new covenant, new promise (Dykstra 107). The theme of God’s steadfast love and faithfulness is everywhere.

And yet, we struggle with the practice of fidelity for a number of reasons. In a culture of unlimited choices, we like to keep our options open and making promises and commitments foreclose some good opportunities. We know that change is likely, and we are afraid to make commitments that bind us. And there can be lots of distortions and deformations in promisemaking and promisekeeping. While we need to recognize varieties of difficulty we face, we really do need to recover the importance of fidelity in relationships. Sorting out how to be faithful in messy situations can be hard, but we need to become more attentive to the promises we make, and how we keep them, and when necessary, how we try to redeem the broken ones. A community cannot move forward without fidelity, nor can an individual’s or community’s yearning for holiness be disconnected from faithfulness in human relationships.

Let’s turn now to truthfulness, truthtelling as a practice of holy community. Again, this is a practice we don’t notice much unless it fails. We notice deception, distortion, lying. But truthfulness is a requisite of community and when it is in practice, it doesn’t usually call attention to itself.

There's lots of discussion in philosophical and theological literature about truth-telling and whether it is ever right to lie, but that's not the direction I want us to go in this morning. I think we can answer those difficult questions better if we have a fuller understanding of what it is to be a truthful community and that's where I want to focus. What does a community look like that loves the truth, that lives truthfully? It is a community without a lot of posturing, a community that attends to details and does not close its eyes to the difficult stuff, that names deception and dissimulation early. It is a community that has an accurate sense of its own fallenness and of God's truth and goodness. In such a community people own their responsibility for sin. When there is wrongdoing, people don't say "it happened" but rather "I did it, or we did it. I take responsibility. I was wrong." A community that loves the truth avoids "no-fault syntax" that allows us to imagine that sin somehow just happens (Komp, 119, quoting John Leo). No, people sin and to repair the brokenness we need to be truthful about what we've done.

In a holy community that loves the truth because it loves Jesus who is the truth, love and truth will be inextricably woven together. Paul writes of speaking the truth in love and growing up in every way into Christ. A truth-filled, holy community holds together truth and love.

But because we want to tie truth to love, we do have to be careful not to confuse speaking the truth in love with euphemism. In our efforts to be nice or kind, sometimes we come very close to falsehood and deception by using language that covers over the real sin or the ugliness of the issue or circumstance. Loving the truth also means that we will resist impulses to "spin" situations in ways that are self-serving but not truthful. This is a temptation for Christians who want to have a good testimony or who don't want to bring dishonor to church or community and choose instead to stretch the truth or to omit aspects of the truth that are relevant but awkward.

But living truthfully is not the same as saying everything that comes into our heads. Truth-telling always includes an element of discernment, an element of the fitting—which makes things more complex. And truth-telling is also not only about being direct, in-your-face approach, as there are cultural differences in how we speak truth, and some patterns of truthfulness are more indirect. Whatever the style, in every holy community people speak the truth to build up, not to tear down.

A holy community will challenge our tendencies toward self-deception. People who want to be good but also want to do what they want are ready targets for the temptation of self-deception. Stanley Hauerwas is quite helpful on this; he notes that we choose to stay ignorant of certain things we are doing, are careful not to bring them into the light of day, in fact, fail to acquire the skills that would challenge our performance. So we "deliberately allow certain engagements (and activities) to go unexamined, quite aware that areas left unaccountable tend to cater to self-interest. As a result ...the condition of self-deception becomes the rule rather than the exception in our lives, and often in the measure that we are trying to be honest and sincere."(Truthfulness & Tragedy,82)

A truthful community will rehearse what it is doing, spell it out. A self-deceived person or community “persistently avoids spelling out some feature of [its] engagement with the world” (Hauerwas, 86). The danger here is that the more we want to be good, the more vulnerable we are to self-deception. If we don’t care about integrity, we’re not likely to feel a need to deceive ourselves or hide something from ourselves by compartmentalizing aspects of our lives.

A truthful community will not necessarily be tidy. There will be some loose threads and rough edges, because such a community is unwilling to cover over wounds lightly, saying peace, peace when there is no peace. A commitment to living truthfully will make safe space for transparency, for the awkwardness of confession and for the long road to forgiveness and healing.

As a holy community responds to the grace and truth it sees in Jesus and receives through Jesus, it turns outward in love and hospitality. A holy community practices hospitality—it makes room for neighbors and strangers. A community that understands itself as invited into God’s purposes, and to God’s table, then in gratitude, turns outward. That grace and gratitude take the form of offering welcome to others.

We worship a savior who is full of grace and truth. Yet John reminds us in chapter 1 that when Jesus came to his own he found no welcome, no room. Without a place himself, he still made room for others. Jesus, the gracious one, made room for the least and the lost, those everyone else was ready to dismiss. Jesus, the gracious one, linked our response to the least and the lost to our response to him. Jesus, through whom the world was made, was willing to come as stranger and guest to us, vulnerable to the world’s hospitality. The mix of roles we see in Jesus—guest, host, stranger, even meal suggests that hospitality belongs at the center of Christian life and community. I wonder if a key to holy community is congregations learning and remembering the significance of welcome.

Holy communities are dependent on strong relationships. And relationships are fostered through daily acts of hospitality, through shared meals, giving one another our attention, taking time for conversation with one another. And communities grow as they invite strangers into those networks of life-giving relationships. But in particular, Christian communities are expected to welcome those who are usually overlooked, the ones least likely to find room or attention in the world. This is distinctive of a Christian understanding of hospitality—so hospitality is not ambitious or calculating, not offered to get something in return, but rather reflects God’s grace—generous and uncalculating. So holy communities will ask themselves—who are the invisible people in our neighborhood? Who needs welcome? Who needs to know that they are precious to God and to God’s people? But also, whose absence is keeping my community and me from being whole?

Jean Vanier, founder of the L’Arche communities, writes that ‘welcome is one of the signs that a community is alive. To invite others to [be] with us is a sign that we aren’t afraid, that we have a treasure of truth and of peace to share’ (Comm. & Growth, 266-7). Recovering hospitality is important for the church, not only for the most marginalized

folks, but for the congregation itself. Hospitality is a means of grace—not just for the recipient but also for the giver. There is a great deal of mystery in the practice of hospitality. Practitioners often comment “we got so much more than we gave.” Sometimes we go into a relationship thinking we can help the person, and end up finding that we are the ones who have been blessed. I’m not sure why that should surprise us, after all, Abraham and Sarah thought they were feeding hungry strangers and found out they were hosting angels, actually the Lord himself who had come with a message of good news and blessing. Or why we should be surprised that when we make room for a troubled teen or lonely senior we catch a glimpse of Jesus, since Jesus has explicitly told us that as we visit the sick person or welcome the stranger we are doing it to him. But it is a mystery that ordinary daily acts of welcome matter so much in the kingdom.

Offering consistent expressions of hospitality isn’t easy, but it is important. If the quality of our community life together is the best apologetic we can offer for the gospel, then people need to be welcomed in to our lives and communities.

So what would a community that practiced hospitality look like? There would be lots of overlap and integration of home and church, an appreciation of the significance of fellowship, not as a nice extra if have the time, but as central. Such a community would recover the practice of eating together and might explicitly connect Eucharist, worship and welcome. In addition, in such a community we would begin to see the mending of the unhelpful division between congregational worship and social ministry or outreach.

A holy community embodies welcome. But to do this, we will have to struggle against our strong task orientation, and our overly busy lifestyles. We will need to reorient priorities, rather than just add hospitality to already overstressed schedules. We will have to resist the emphasis on efficiency because hospitality takes time. Often opportunities for hospitality come to us in the form of interruptions. But what if the interruptions are the in-breaking of God’s grace. What if the interruptions are invitations to deeper understandings and experiences of holiness? What if our acts of hospitality somehow are the grace and truth of Jesus for the world?

There is so much more that could be said about these four practices and their relationship to holiness and community. We could talk at length about how the practices interact with each other, the relationship between fidelity and gratitude, for example. Or we could talk about how the deformation of one practice affects another practice—for example, the impact of deception on the practice of hospitality. We could look at the contextual factors that affect practices, and explore, for example what happens when people have the power to demand fidelity or truthfulness from others, but don’t live by those commitments themselves. And we could explore institutional factors in church, family or school that make the practices easier or harder.

Instead, today I want to end with questions for personal reflection, with a focus on our close relationships within our most immediate communities.

So, let's take a minute to reflect and to come before the Lord. Think about aspects of your life and relationships that are holy and good, in which grace and truth are wonderfully evident. And thank God for the fidelity, truthfulness, hospitality and gratitude that is present in them. Try to be specific.

Now take a moment to think about your practice of fidelity. Are there places you have been careless about commitments, made promises too quickly and broken them too easily? Where you have disappointed or even betrayed the trust of a loved one or a community that trusted you? Are there some repairs that are needed? Give some thought to what needs to be done.

What about truthfulness—have you chosen “spin” over truth, have you stretched the truth because you didn't have the energy for the consequences of truthfulness? Are there activities in which you are involved that you have chosen not to notice, that you keep in a corner—hidden, so you don't have to deal with the fact that they have no place in a holy life? Give some thought to what needs to be done.

Think about hospitality. Is your life so full of tasks that you don't even notice the person who needs welcome? Are there ways you could make more room for family members, neighbors, and strangers? Are there changes you need to make in your lifestyle so there's more room to respond to God's interruptions?

And finally, has it been easier to grumble than to be grateful? Has grumbling become a way of life? Is envy keeping you from seeing and using the wonderful gifts with which God has graced your life?

I don't know where you are or how you might need to respond, but holiness is what we long for, and holiness is what we need. Holiness is what God wants for us, individually and in community. Hopefully, a look at a few practices has given us a fresh way to think about living into a culture of grace and truth, a fresh way to think about how we can be a holy community together.

So, let's pray in closing,

Gracious, loving God, you are the Holy One who redeems the wrongs we have done and the wrongs done to us. Make us whole and holy. By your Holy Spirit, give us a vision, and give us the power to form holy communities that honor you and demonstrate to a broken and needy world the fidelity and grace, the truth and welcome of Jesus, In whose name we pray. Amen.