

What I Believe

Jeremy Bierlein '97

At dinner around my house (most nights) you'll hear a table prayer. Perhaps it's one you've prayed: *God is great, God is good and we thank God for this food. Amen.*

If you listened in at my table, every night is a little bit different. Sometimes, all three kids join in with me. Other times, I'm all by myself. But mostly, you'll hear different words shouted out or mumbled and burred through cheeks bulging with chewed food.

One night however, something new tumbled from the lips of my four-year old daughter Sophie. Never the wallflower, she started boldly "God is grace, God is good..."

Ever the older brother, Ethan slammed the brakes on mid-prayer with a loud whisper: "SO-PHIE! It's GREAT. God is GREAT! Not grace..." At six, the world is pretty black and white and clearly Sophie's prayer was not going to pass the litmus test of correctness required for our esteemed table of turkey, apples, salad, and milk.

In a rare flash of parental clarity, I quickly intervened in the doctrinal battle brewing in front of me. "Ethan, you are right. What we usually say is 'God is great.' But Sophie is right too. Because God is not only good and great, but God is also grace and love."

Any feelings of "I summon the vast power of a St. Olaf education!" brilliance wore off the moment Sophie stuck her tongue out in vindication and Ethan started loudly praying his way, the "right way." Nothing like kids to keep you humble.

Still, my daughter had it right.

I was blessed with a St. Olaf experience that was wonderful; deep and rich, frustrating and challenging. But it's also pretty rarified air on the hill and life is certainly what happens while you're making other plans.

For someone who manages projects and people, it is easy for me to look at my classmates who served in AmeriCorps, went on to be pastors, or run non-profits and say "See! Look over there! Lives of worth and service – someone better get their story in the alumni magazine and quick."

But grace seems to nudge into the ordinary as much as the extraordinary. Like my other son Micah, the giggle of grace invites "Come play with me. Let's do a silly dance." and the tears of grace ask "I fell off my bike and I need a hug." So too, grace enters our daily grown-up lives, our hurts, our joys.

These days, prayers at the dinner table pretty much sound the same as they did before. But if you listen very carefully among crunching croutons and slurping milk, you'll hear one voice with grace among the greats.

Perhaps if you cooked down all of the lectures and discussions, distilled all of the friendships, and gleaned one thing from all of the triumphs and heartaches of a journey at St. Olaf, just maybe that's the one thing to take away from it all.

To welcome grace and to be grace in the world.