182. BIRTHDAY SURPRISES - NOVEMBER 16, 2026

Hey there, Grace Harbor – it's Dan. Welcome back!

I hope you had a good week last week. Mine was quite mysterious. Or perhaps suspicious is a better word.

Have you ever walked into a room, and the people in the room suddenly get very quiet? It's like they *were* talking, but the conversation ended the moment you entered. They pause for a moment and just look at you. And then someone seems to change the subject, and they come back to life, acting like everything is normal.

Yeah, that happened to me multiple times this week! And in multiple places too! It happened at my house, around the church, at the coffee shop… At first, I was confused. And then I started to worry. Was everyone talking about me? And if they were, *why* were they talking about me?

Did I do something embarrassing or upset someone, and now they're all talking about it? I recently pulled my sweaters out of the closet since the temperature has been dropping. Does everyone secretly think they look bad?

I tried to convince myself that everything was fine. My family, my friends, my neighbors – they love me. If there was something wrong, they would tell me. But when it kept happening, I went from worried to suspicious.

Then other suspicious things started happening. For one, I popped into the coffee shop on Wednesday to see Bobby and

get one last pumpkin spice latte. It's one of my favorite things he makes all year, and the small countertop chalkboard near the cash register that details the seasonal specials had declared Wednesday to be the last day to get one.

But when I went to pay, I noticed the sign had changed. It said "extended by special request" and "enjoy this fall favorite for a few extra days!"

I asked Bobby about it, and he said, "Well, I've still got some pumpkin syrup left, so I might as well use it up!"

"But the sign says, 'extended by special request.' Were you reading my mind?" I asked with a laugh.

"Maybe!" he replied and got back to work.

Then, Thursday night at dinner, my daughter announced, "I have a new game for us to play! It's called the favorites game!"

"Oooh, this sounds like fun," my wife said.

We then spent much of the rest of the meal picking a category and each sharing our favorite thing from that category.

We did favorite colors – blue is very popular in our house. Favorite animals – my son and I both picked pandas. Favorite holiday – which for me is Christmas followed very closely by Thanksgiving.

But as we were playing, there were a few times my Spidey-sense kicked in. When we were covering favorite treat, and I answered “chocolate chip cookie milkshake,” I saw my daughter exchange a glance and a quick smile with my wife.

The next category was favorite family activity – which was hard for me to pick just one. I thought for a moment and went with a family walk in the Pine Preserve. When my son heard this, he lit up and started to say, “ooh, we’re gonna…” but he couldn’t finish the sentence because my wife had put her hand near his mouth and said loudly, “We’re going to… have dessert! Isn’t that right?” The thought of dessert distracted my son, and I guess me, because we never found out what *he* thought we were going to do.

Why don’t you all take some time to play a quick round or two of the favorites game? I recommend categories like favorite food, favorite dessert, or your favorite way to spend a Saturday. And make sure you pay attention to each other’s answers because it just might be important later! If you need more time, feel free to pause the podcast, and I’ll be right here when you get back.

[PAUSE]

Well, on Friday and Saturday things seemed to go back to normal. I thought, ‘maybe I was wrong, and I’d been picking up on vibes that weren’t actually there.’

Then, on Sunday morning, that *all* changed.

Every Sunday, I hit the coffee shop on my way into church, and I was surprised to see Bobby there. He doesn't normally work on Sundays, but there he was behind the counter. And not only that, he was putting the finishing touches on a fresh pumpkin spice latte.

"Here you go, friend," he said. "This one's on the house."

That means it's a gift, and I didn't have to pay for it. "Wow, are you sure?" I asked. "That's so kind."

"No problem," he said. "It turns out today *is* the last day for these, and I wanted to be sure you got one."

He was untying his apron as he said this, and I asked, "Are you heading out already? The shop's only been open a half hour."

"I did what I came to do," he replied with a smile, patting my shoulder as he headed to the door.

'That was strange,' I thought. 'Super kind, but strange.'

I sat for a few minutes to enjoy my drink while it was still hot, and then I headed to the church. The whole morning, as folks arrived to help set up, they had really big smiles on their faces when they saw me. Don't get me wrong, I like being smiled at. It's definitely better than when people frown or go "ugh!" But it seemed… different. I

can’t really explain it, but it was different.

This kind of thing continued as I greeted folks arriving for the service. Lots of extra big smiles. I saw the occasional whispered conversation too as people walked from the parking lot toward the door. Something was definitely up, but no one said anything out of the ordinary. If there was a secret, it seemed everyone had agreed not to share it with me.

I wonder if you can guess what was coming.

Well, all was revealed shortly after the church service began. I welcomed everyone and shared a few announcements. I said a prayer to help focus our hearts for worship, and then I handed it over to our music team to lead us in the first song.

But when the music began, it wasn’t an old hymn. And it wasn’t a new song either. It was… happy birthday!

I had, somehow, completely forgotten it was my birthday! I mean, I *know* when my birthday is, and I knew it was coming up. But sometimes when you get to be an adult, it can slip your mind, especially when things are busy.

But in that moment, suddenly all of the suspicious things began to make sense. All the whispering. All of the conversations that ended when I walked into the room. They must have been talking about my birthday.

All of the questions about favorite things, it wasn’t just a

fun game. It was a way to get ideas about what to include in a birthday celebration.

And Bobby… oh, Bobby. He must've kept the pumpkin spice latte on the menu for a few extra days just for me! When the sign by the register said, "extended by special request," I'll bet that request came from my family. And, of course, he'd come to the shop that morning just long enough to make me one last fall special. He is so kind.

And the fun didn't stop there. It was just beginning. After our traditional post-lunch Sunday rest time, my kids brought me my walking shoes and Luke's leash, and the whole family headed down to the Pine Preserve for an afternoon walk.

Remember when I said this was my favorite family activity, and my son started to say something before my wife stopped him and distracted us all with dessert? I'll bet he knew this was part of the plan!

And despite the temperature only being in the mid-40s, the walk got our blood pumping, and the sun warmed us just enough that I had no complaints when we stopped at Auden and Brookie's Ice Cream & Cookies for a chocolate chip cookie milkshake on the way home.

I cannot tell you how special this all made me feel. It was clear that everyone had put a lot of thought into planning a day I would love.

You know, over the last month or so, we've talked a lot

about generosity. We've talked about giving and sharing. And, at least for me, when I think about being generous, the first thing my mind tends to think of is the size of my gift. I need to try to give as *much* as I can, and if it's not a big or valuable gift, then it might not mean as much.

But today was a wonderful reminder that things don't need to be big or expensive to be valuable. A cup of coffee and a milkshake don't cost a ton. Singing a surprise happy birthday and going for a family walk? Those don't cost *anything*. But they meant *so much* to me because they were things I love given by people I love. The whole day showed me just how much people know me and love me, and I couldn't have asked for a better birthday.

Similarly, everyone who has donated to the winter coat drive the kids dreamed up at Ella's St. Martin's Day Lantern Walk is also making others feel loved through generosity. It might not feel like a big deal to give away something you don't use anymore, but when it's something someone else needs, it *is* a big deal.

One of our core disciplines here on the podcast is practicing gratitude, and making someone feel known and loved is an excellent way to do it. Of course, telling someone that we appreciate them or making them a card or a piece of art lets someone know they're special because it shows you took time. But maybe you're looking for other ways to celebrate someone.

Intentionally asking about or listening for someone's

favorite things might give you ideas for gifts that are small but make a big impact. Learning someone's favorite activities might reveal a way you can spend time together that makes them feel special.

Do you see now why I said, "be sure you remember each other's answers to the favorites game"? It might not be anyone's birthday in your family this week, but you can still practice gratitude by surprising each other with their favorites.

Earlier this fall, we reflected on what Jesus said were the most important things people could do, and the second one was "love your neighbor as you love yourself." A lot of times, we think of this as meaning we shouldn't be mean to others because we wouldn't like it if someone were mean to us. And that's really important, of course.

But we can take the positive side of things as well! We would feel loved if someone surprised us with one of our favorites, and so we can help others feel loved by doing the same for them. And when we look at it this way, we aren't just being nice, but we're loving others the way Jesus asked us to.

Ok, let's close in prayer. If you want to, you can close your eyes and fold your hands.

Dear God, we thank you for the people who know us and love us and for the ways they make us feel special. Help us love our family, friends, and neighbors by noticing what they love and finding ways to surprise and delight them. When

we do this, we’re not only following your teaching, but we’re following your example. Amen.

Alright, Grace Harbor, go make someone feel special, and I’ll talk to you next week.

© 2026 Defining Grace, LLC | Written by Dan Wunderlich