

What is your experience of grace?
Thanks for reading and reflecting!

“SERVANT HEART”
Mark 1:29-39
February 7, 2021

Mark wastes no time setting Jesus to work among the forgotten people: those in and around Capernaum who were sick, deranged, homeless and marginalized. In four short stories within one passage, Mark shows us how to have servant hearts. Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church: Mark 1, verses 29-39:

Directly on leaving the meeting place, they came to Simon and Andrew’s house, accompanied by James and John. Simon’s mother-in-law was sick in bed, burning up with fever. They told Jesus. He went to her, took her hand, and raised her up. No sooner had the fever left than she was up fixing dinner for them.

That evening, after the sun was down, they brought sick and evil-afflicted people to him, the whole city lined up at his door! He cured their sick bodies and tormented spirits. Because the demons knew his true identity, he didn’t let them say a word.

While it was still night, way before dawn, he got up and went out to a secluded spot and prayed. Simon and those with him went looking for him. They found him and said, “Everybody’s looking for you.”

Jesus said, “Let’s go to the rest of the villages so I can preach there also. This is why I’ve come.” He went to their meeting places all through Galilee, preaching and throwing out the demons.

Here ends the reading. May God bless these words as we seek to apply them to our lives.

Chris and I were hunting around on Netflix the other day, looking for a good movie to watch. We came across an older favorite of mine that I had, quite frankly forgotten: “Eat, Pray, Love.” In Elizabeth Gilbert’s semi-autobiography, after going through a divorce she decides to take a year off from writing to go find herself. She chooses to go to Italy, India, and Bali. During a discussion she is

having about grace with her sister, Catherine, the issue of service comes up. She writes about the encounter:

A family in my sister's neighborhood was recently stricken with a double tragedy, when both the young mother and her three-year-old son were diagnosed with cancer. When Catherine told me about this, I could only say, shocked, "Dear God, that family needs grace." She replied firmly, "That family needs *casseroles*," and then proceeded to organize the entire neighborhood into bringing that family dinner, in shifts, every single night, for an entire year. I do not know if my sister fully recognizes that this is grace."

What an interesting connection to make—service as an act of grace. First, we need to understand the meaning of grace. Here's my definition: The free and unmerited favor of God that confers blessings upon us and makes us want to deepen our relationship with the divine.

In Greek, the word for grace is *charís*, the root word for our English word, "Charity." It is the thing not earned and unable to be repaid, an unconditional blessing upon the life of the recipient.

In the passage Curtis just read for you, there is a clear example of what I call "the servant's heart." It is demonstrated in the story of Jesus' healing of Simon's mother-in-law, for which profound gift she responds in gratitude by serving a meal to Jesus, her son-in-law Simon, and his other companions. This grace is probably more characterized as "graciousness," an act of gratitude by a person with a servant's heart.

Grace is a hard concept to wrap our heads around. Maybe that's because we rarely give it without the expectation of receiving something in return, a "thank you," a payment in money or in emotion or loyalty, or an acknowledgement that we have given up something for another that we did not have to.

We don't receive grace easily either. We deny it to ourselves regularly. When it is bestowed on us, we are often left not knowing how to respond. "What do you

mean I don't have to pay this back? How can I possibly offer myself this gift? I don't deserve your generosity. I haven't earned this grace."

How do we receive grace from God, especially when we are not practiced at it? I called on some of my wisdom mentors for the answer. See if any of these resonate with you:

From Richard Rohr, theologian and peace-giver:

*The goodness of God fills all the gaps of the universe, without discrimination or preference. God is the gratuity of absolutely everything. The space in between everything is not space at all but Spirit. God is the "Goodness Glue" that holds the dark and light of things together, the free energy that carries all death across the Great Divide and transmutes it into Life. When we say that Christ "paid the debt once and for all," it simply means that God's job is to make up for all deficiencies in the universe. What else would God do? *Grace is what God does to keep all things God has made in love and alive—forever.* Grace is not something God gives; grace is who God is. If we are to believe the primary witnesses, an unexplainable goodness is at work in the universe. (Some of us call this phenomenon God, but the word is not necessary. In fact, sometimes it gets in the way of the experience, because too many have named God something other than grace.)*

Julian of Norwich, a mystic and anchoress writing in the 14th century, describes grace as:

Love—the unfathomable love that is God—is God's meaning, and however much we search and speculate, dismiss and deconstruct, we will find no other answer or meaning but this.

Metaphorically, I have found these images helpful:

From Rabindranath Tagore, a Bengali poet and Nobel Prize Winner from the early 20th century:

Rather than hammer-strokes, grace is a dance of the water that sings the pebbles into perfection.

Anne Lamott, one of my favorite writers, paints us this word picture:

Sometimes grace works like water wings when you feel you are sinking...

Grace means you're in a different universe from where you had been stuck, when you had absolutely no way to get there on your own... Sometimes grace is a ribbon of mountain air that gets in through the cracks.

And one last thought from Henri Nouwen, 20th century Dutch Catholic Priest and theologian:

We cannot force God into a relationship. God comes to us on his own initiative, and no discipline, effort, or ascetic practice can make him come. All mystics stress with an impressive unanimity that prayer is “grace”—that is, a free gift from God, to which we can only respond with gratitude. But they hasten to add that this precious gift indeed is within our reach. In Jesus Christ, God has entered into our lives in the most intimate way, so that we could enter into his life through the Spirit.

I hope that one or more of these musings kissed your soul and brought you connection with the emotion of Simon's grateful mother-in-law. Yes, in her culture, it was her work to serve others. But on this Sabbath day in her story, I think she serves her healer and the disciples because she is grateful for the grace shown her by God through the healing touch of Jesus.

You undoubtedly have been touched by God's gift of grace to you in your life: the birth of your child, the wet nose kisses of your kitten, a rainbow breaking over your highway drive, the bittersweet remembrance of your parent or spouse, sibling or friend, long-since gone from the earth but ever stamped on your heart—these are all experiences of God's grace. There are thousands more. Feel free to use the chat box to give your own example.

The servant's heart is a joyful one. It does not sing a song of obligation or expectation; rather, its melody is Amazing Grace and its message is one of profound gratefulness. The servant's heart is a heart beating in lockstep with the divine love of God who gives everything to us and expects nothing in return. Grace is God's freely bestowed blessing upon each and every life in creation; we

people of faith return the love for God not out of debt but rather out of the fullness and gratefulness of being.

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